

**“TEEMING DELIGHT:” IRISH POETRY 1930-1960**

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## **“TEEMING DELIGHT:” IRISH POETRY 1930-1960**

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The dissertation provides a survey of poetry in largely critically neglected decades of Irish literature, arguing that the poetry of Denis Devlin, Thomas MacGreevy, Samuel Beckett, Austin Clarke, Patrick Kavanagh, and Blanaid Salkeld represents a crucial phase in the development of Irish poetry. In the first three chapters I argue that Denis Devlin, Thomas MacGreevy, and Samuel Beckett develop a uniquely Irish form of modernism that sits uneasily with both Irish and Continental traditions, examines the horrors of modern war, and in the case of Beckett, proposes a form of humanism based on the physiology of the body that radically departs from Enlightenment models. The Kavanagh chapter examines his reclamation and reformation of the Irish bardic tradition of pastoral dystopianism and Kavanagh's attempts at a new poetic based in anti-Pauline, post-institutionalized Christianity. The fifth chapter explores Clarke's reanimation of technical aspects of pre-eighteenth-century Irish poetry and, despite his public anti-Yeatsian statements, argues that his poetry both carries on and develops the Revivalist project. The Salkeld chapter proposes that Irish feminism operates in the poetry of this period in ways that both undermine and support the projects of Salkeld's male counterparts.

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## PREFACE

My father was the first writer I knew. There is nothing I can say that could fully acknowledge the hand he had in what was to become my career and indeed, my first love—reading and talking to others about poetry. From both my parents, who threw away not a single novel they read in college (and thus made them all available for me to find and read) I received the best preparation for the life I now lead.

From Bucknell University I wish to thank Harold Schweizer, who taught me that the most important question is not how but why; John Rickard, who introduced me to Joyce and Irish literature; and Ghislaine MacDayter, who convinced me that even as an undergraduate I had something worth saying.

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I want to offer profound thanks to the late Eric Clarke, who found in me a fellow lover of Theodor Adorno and saw fit to phone me with an invitation to study with him and his colleagues at Pitt. His incisive and often troubling questions were among the first to challenge me to dig deeper, cast more widely, and to love more fully as a scholar.

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It is not easy to share your parents with their work. Sam, this dissertation is as much yours as mine. I cannot wait to see your own dreams unfold.

## “QUAKING SOD:” WRITING OUT OF THE REVIVAL AND INTO MODERN IRELAND

*Water wears  
The stone away  
And out of the river  
The arc-lamp rays and the  
Wind weave  
Try to weave  
Something or other  
From flight and water.*

-from “Liffey Bridge,” Denis Devlin

*The Irish self. . . was a project: and its characteristic text was a process,  
unfinished, fragmenting.*

*Each artist [Synge, Yeats, Beckett, Joyce] had, strictly speaking, no predicate;  
and so the text had no time other than that of its enunciation.*

-Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*

*The swans on the leaden coloured water  
Look like hostile ghosts  
Of kings  
Who resent our presence.*

*Are they not right?  
How should we  
Whose hearts are with the dead  
Come here  
And not die?*

-“Winter,” Thomas MacGreevy

In 1998, just three years after his Nobel Prize in literature, Seamus Heaney published a large selection of his poetry entitled *Opened Ground*. Heaney explains his choice to include his Nobel lecture, “Crediting Poetry,” by observing that “the ground covered in the lecture is ground originally opened by the poems which here proceed it” (“Author’s Note”). One of his earliest (and certainly the most famous) poems, “Digging,” conflates the act of writing with the act of breaking ground and bridges the intellectual and cultural natures of Heaney’s profession with the material nature of his father’s and grandfather’s turf-cutting.

Although Heaney claims ground-opening on the part of his own poetry, it is worth asking what opened the ground for *his* poetry. Who, in other words, makes his poetry—and the poetry that has come out of Ireland for in last fifty years—possible? Heaney credits Yeats heavily in his lecture, as well he should, but it is as if he skipped to his grandfather without regard for his father (and in both “Digging” and the lecture, his mothers and grandmothers). Though Heaney has mentioned the influence of Patrick Kavanagh in other places, Kavanagh’s absence here is conspicuous given both the ubiquity of Heaney’s engagements with the soil in his poetry and the metaphors of earth and field figured in the book’s title and opening poem (“Digging”). In some ways Patrick Kavanagh’s long poem “The Great Hunger” describes not just the cultural and literary situation of Ireland in the mid-twentieth century but the critical one surrounding this period. Long considered a fallow time in Irish literature, I argue instead that these decades carry Irish poetry from its first to second revivals through the darkening of the Celtic Twilight into Celtic Night, the development of a robust Irish literary response to modernism(s), and the increasing international orientation of Irish poetry as a consequence of chosen and forced exile.

Heaney has more to gain from his mid-century predecessors, however, than dystopian pastoralism. Heaney largely credits Yeats for mastery of the kind of poetry that unapologetically



acknowledges both real violence and the compassionate, life-affirming response it can engender, but it was the mid-century poets who carried this impulse through to the contemporary era. In his 1995 Nobel Lecture, Heaney describes Yeats' "Meditations in Time of Civil War:" "It knows that the massacre will happen again on the roadside . . .; but it also credits as a reality the squeeze of the hand, the actuality of sympathy and protectiveness between living creatures" (428).

Heaney's continued description could also apply to MacGreevy's war poetry, or Clarke's poems in the voices of women, or Beckett's pessimism laced with tenderness:

It satisfies the contradictory needs which consciousness experiences at times of extreme crisis, the need on the one hand for a truth-telling that will be hard and retributive, and on the other hand the need not to harden the mind to a point where it denies its own yearnings for sweetness and trust. It is a proof that poetry can be equal to *and* true at the same time . . . (428)

Kavanagh is not, of course, the sole link between Yeats and those who come after, and though he is the most well-known of mid-twentieth-century Irish poets, he was only one of many scratching their ways into the hard-packed ground of stale and outmoded forms of cultural nationalism, native resistance to innovation, and the lack of a large and enthusiastic reading public in Ireland. In the grand critical narrative of Irish literature Yeats' genius is followed by the necessary exile of Joyce (with the exception of a few novelists) and picked up again after the economic revitalizations of the 1960s; but this narrative misses entire decades of important development in Irish poetry that would lay the foundation—or to disrupt the foundation that had already been laid—for the poetry of our contemporary era.

In his 1902 essay “What is ‘Popular Poetry?’” Yeats<sup>1</sup> reconstructs the origin of his conception of what we have come to know as the Irish Literary Revival or Renaissance. By the time of the essay’s writing the Revival was well underway, and despite Yeats’ choice of words it had flowered under the hands of many. Remembering his days in the Young Ireland Society, a group of intellectuals concerned with the preservation of traditional Irish culture, such as it could have been recalled or reinvented, Yeats admits that although “most” of the Irish balladists of the time “wrote badly;” “such romance clung about them” that they moved him more than the works of Shelley and Spenser. It was this incongruity Yeats thought should be remedied. He recalls thinking

‘If somebody could make a style which would not be an English style and yet would be musical and full of colour, many others would catch fire from him, and we would have a really great school of ballad poetry in Ireland. If these poets, who have never ceased to fill the newspapers and the ballad-books with their verses, had a good tradition they would write beautifully and move everybody as they move me . . . If they had something else to write about besides political opinions, if more of them would write about the beliefs of the people like

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<sup>1</sup> In positing the Irish Literary Revival as the point of departure for the poets I study, I want to make it clear that Yeats’ relationship to the Revival was complex. In many ways Yeats himself grew out of and away from the Revival towards a more modernist aesthetic—to what extent he can be read as a modernist is a major point of critical contention—and I agree with Stan Smith that the overly strict critical division between Yeats and Joyce ignores the extent to which Yeats deconstructs the very myth that energizes his poetry and the Revival itself. Although the poets I study take a conscious stance against Yeatsian aesthetics, Yeats himself begins the process that undoes the Revival.

Allingham, or about old legends like Ferguson, they would find it easier to get a style.’ Then with a deliberateness that still surprises me . . . I set to work to find a style and things to write about that the ballad-writers might be the better. (Yeats 363-4)

At work here are two different impulses: to answer to the current conundrum, that of an inferior contemporary Irish poetic, lies both in the past and in the reinvention or reanimation of that past; and to intentionally draft a tradition from which all future Irish literature would emanate. What is missing is a sense of the present: what kind of poetic allows for rigorous engagement with the Ireland of *now*? If recovery and transformation are directed only toward a bright, utopian future, and not to what Ireland *is*, how can such a poetic survive? That is, when the reality on the ground resembles something quite different from what the Revival has asked writers to envision—a culturally unified Ireland continuous with previous periods—in what capacity can the poet who writes about that messy ground be heard? What could replace the initial fervor of “the teeming delight that would re-create the world” (Yeats Synge 8) as decades of poverty, war, and continued disagreement about the nature of true Irishness wore on?

Although the poets of this period do not write in the Revivalist mode as Yeats conceives of it above, there are a number of Revival features that persist, albeit in somewhat changed forms, through the middle decades and into contemporary poetry. The strongest of these strains is the Revivalist attempt to “humanize” the Gael, or to recover him from the embarrassing and inaccurate portrayals common in English circles of the time that became known under the term “stage Irishman.” In his well-known work on the preeminent playwright of the time, Yeats praises J.M. Synge’s careful reproduction of dialect (“Synge” 31) which Daniel Corkery, for whom the term “Anglo-Irish” was an oxymoron, echoes.

1931, the beginning of the last decade of Yeats's life and the last gasps of the Revival's energies, brought the publication of Corkery's *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*. In it Corkery argues that Anglo-Irish literature, aside from a few brief moments during times of national crisis, has not become truly national, truly Irish (3), not only because the majority of Revivalists are from the Ascendency class—that class of Irish-born, Protestant people descended from colonizing English and Scottish settlers—and therefore cannot authentically write from an Irish perspective, but because the market for Irish literature is (at the time of his writing) overwhelmingly English and American. In contrast to American and Russian writers, for example, who retain a national identity even in exile, and for whom a native audience exists, Anglo-Irish writers, many of them expatriates, find themselves writing to those who know only the Ireland of popular foreign imagination. “The typical expatriate writer continues to find his matter in Irish life; his choice of it, however, and his treatment of it when chosen, are to a greater or less extent imposed upon him by alien considerations” (5). For this reason Corkery distrusts expatriate poets, among them MacGreevy and Clarke (though Clarke was to spend only 15 years outside of Ireland). To Corkery, the abandonment of Irish ground is the expatriate's key mistake (19).

But Synge gives Corkery hope that a truly “Irish” literature can emerge even from an Anglo-Irish tradition, if it manages to come up from the ground; for Corkery, this is both literal and figurative ground. In Synge's case, a willingness to rebirth himself in native Irish life allowed him to write true Irish literature. “. . . he, an Ascendency man, went into the huts of the people and lived with them” (Corkery 27). Synge's extensive, first-hand research into the customs and dialects of western Irish people, many of whom still spoke Irish Gaelic as their first

tongue, allowed Synge to fashion complex, multifaceted Irish characters who, in Corkery's estimation, were truly representative of native Irish life.

Corkery's definition of "true" Irishness as rural, Catholic, and Irish-speaking is hopelessly narrow, particularly in light of the social realities of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland. The majority of people living in Ireland were both native-born and English-speaking, urban life was very much alive in Dublin, and the presence of a uniquely Irish Christianity permeated both Catholic and Protestant traditions. According to Corkery's own criteria, moreover, the emerging poetic of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland was indeed a national poetry, though perhaps in more fraught ways than Corkery preferred. "The three great forces" of "the Irish national being," he writes, are "I. The Religious Consciousness of the People; II. Irish Nationalism; and III. The Land" (19). Irish nationalism is the weakest of the three ways that Irish poetry of this period conforms to Corkery's guidelines, if only because too tenacious a commitment to Irish nationalism (of the sort that had wide currency at the time) might well have stifled its ability to freely embrace the other two. If, for example, Kavanagh had been too careful to create a rural ideal consistent with popular forms of nationalism, particularly those celebrated by Revival writers, he might not have been able to explore the multiple shades of significance of the Land in *The Great Hunger*. That the poem served as a precursor to poems like John Montague's *The Rough Field* is the direct consequence of its refusal to see the land as a one-dimensional ideal; indeed, as pastoral as Seamus Heaney's poems can be, Kavanagh's darkness is woven in. Consider, for example, the sixth section of Heaney's "Kinship," where "mother ground" is a murderess:

Our mother ground  
is sour with the blood

of her faithful,

they lie gargling

in her sacred heart

as the legions stare

from the ramparts. (lines 66-72)

Between the end of Irish Literary Revival and the beginning of the era of prosperity thought to be ushered in by the policies of Whitaker and Lemass, Irish life was marked by political neutrality, cultural insularity, and social and religious conservatism. Most scholars agree that the conditions created by censorship policies, poverty, and governmental resistance to foreign cultural exchange made it nearly impossible for cultural expression to flourish as it had during the Revival years. These three decades are widely considered to be a period of cultural stagnation, in which the only Irish literature worthy of critical attention, aside from the last works of Yeats, was written outside of Ireland (i.e., that of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett). Terence Brown, writing about the 1930s, laments that “that intellectual and imaginative stirring which had once stimulated Edward Martyn to affirm that ‘the sceptre of intelligence has passed from London to Dublin’ had now ended. Dublin was a place to leave” (Brown 155). He contrasts the deadness of Dublin with the vibrancy of Paris, to which many Irish authors had flocked. He describes a scene bereft of literary experimentation (154) and a literature that “could be redeemed only if a proper concern with nationality was combined with an acceptance of the riches of European culture” against Irish provincialism (156). Brown’s outlook is not all gloom and doom, however; he does recognize the importance of modernist poets Devlin, Brian Coffey, and MacGreevy (156). Brown also notes the increase in readership of library books during the

war years (166). He is hardly optimistic, however; his general thesis is that good writing in mid-century Ireland was the exception rather than the rule. John Banville writes in more dire tones about the general cultural situation in the 1950s from his own memory of the period. Ireland was a “demilitarized state in which the lives of the citizens were to be controlled not by a system of coercive force and secret policing, but by a kind of applied spiritual paralysis maintained by an unofficial federation between the Catholic clergy, the judiciary and the civil service” (Banville 26). Many books on contemporary Irish poetry begin with despair over the lack of a lively culture of poetry prior to the time of Lemass before moving on to celebrate more contemporary poetry.

The generally accepted thesis has its detractors. Among them are a majority of the essayists included in *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s*. The essayists call into question not only the assumption that the 1950s were marked by cultural stagnation, but also the belief that the structural reasons normally blamed for this situation (censorship, isolationism, and Catholic conservatism) prohibited cultural activity such as the writing of good literature. Brian Fallon, for instance, argues that Ireland was not as isolated culturally, nor was there as much resistance to modern art as has been argued. He cites the annual Irish Exhibition of Living Art in Dublin, a showcase for new art, started in 1943, as an example (Fallon 36). He writes of a public highly engaged in foreign affairs (40) and increasingly hostile towards the constraints of the Catholic Church (35). Fallon also argues that Ireland had no more censorship during this period than other European countries (33), which challenges the widely accepted thesis that Ireland’s censorship was largely responsible for its lack of vigorous cultural production. Fallon does not mention poetry at length in his essay, but does mention the revitalization of the visual arts, journalism, and broadcasting. In addition, Fallon ends the essay by describing the 1950s as a transitional

time that would lead into what is thought to be the rebirth of Irish literature in the 1960s and 1970s. This thesis leaves the previous two decades in the dark and assumes that the 1950s were years of awakening, not of a continuation of artistic viability. Fallon shares similar thoughts on the entire period in his book, *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960*.

The degree to which Irish life was characterized by stagnation is not a settled matter; more important, though, is that the *idea* of cultural stagnation, isolation, and confinement became a highly salient problem for Irish poets of this period. However else mid-twentieth-century Irish poetry varies in terms of style and theme, every body of poetry under study in this project explores both the literary and societal implications of ideology which begot confinement and stagnation. To some, like Devlin, who carefully considers all available forms of expression, including both Irish and continental literary forms, there is no viable way forward; MacGreevy's response is resignation. Others, though, see possibility not in new literary forms per se but in a reconceptualization of the discourses provided by the very same institutions and traditions they reject. Kavanagh imagines a new kind of post-Pauline Christianity which creates room for life and growth; Beckett compels his readers to attend to the biological realities of real bodies in time to assert a new kind of humanism; Clarke reinvigorates select conventions of seventeenth-century Irish Gaelic poetry in ways that speak to new realities of Irish life; and Salkeld's robust optimism emphasizes the inherent freedom of the soul, regardless of the confinement of body and mind.

Denis Devlin's poem "Liffey Bridge" asks what, aside from the Revival, had Ireland to offer a poet in mid-century but an eroded sense of cultural identity ("water wears the stone away") and of leave-taking ("flight")? In some ways erosion and migration are more honest (non)materials for poetry because they acknowledge fragmentation of the cultural body.



MacGreevy's poetry, in dealing with war and uncertain national and cultural identity, hangs on this sense of brokenness without, it seems, much of a desire for wholeness, whereas Devlin's nostalgically yearns for it; like Yeats Devlin draws energy from past traditions, and like Eliot this tradition consists of classical poetry, Greek, Roman, and Irish, but he holds out no hope for a neoclassical revival in Irish poetry. His poetry is continually in mourning. MacGreevy's is post-mourning, having abandoned—at least expressly—the quest for a suitable literary aesthetic. Irish modernist poetry, then, was an expression of lack and disappointment more than an attempt at a new wave of poetry for Ireland. Yet what does emerge from this period is startlingly appropriate to the time and cultural circumstances. Devlin and MacGreevy may write with a sense of failure but the aesthetic that characterizes their poetry begs for its place in the history of modernism. It reflects an ambivalence over available aesthetic strategies that, in its amplification of certain features of European modernism specific to its own aesthetic predicament, contributes to the already multifaceted nature of mid-century modernism.

Gerald Dawe articulates Irish modernist responses to the pressures of the past by formulating it in terms of their commitment to poetry itself.

We encounter . . . a sense of critical distance between them, their writing and 'the' tradition; and the life of the intelligence, to which Seamus Deane alludes, is seen as an *imaginative* source of their poetry.

He laments the critical impulse to appeal to the heavily-laid tradition that precedes mid-century poets, which

was mainly established by Yeats and we continue, even if in reaction, to accept the terms of reference he laid down. This is a pedagogical consolation . . . . What it ignores is the fundamental act of self-definition which every poet must

experience and the imaginative, critical and political distance this act may involve, between his or her self and the poetic tradition present at the time he or she was writing. Often this tradition will be seen as broken, inadequate, stultifying and the poet looks elsewhere to discover, not so much that which is new, but rather other forms and ideals which have meaning for him. I think this act of self-definition and the artistic consciousness which goes with it . . . implicates them in a reworking of the tradition, in the creation of an imaginative space beyond it.

(Dawe, *Absence* 120-1).

Dawe correctly diagnoses the poet's predicament, but we might take exception in the study of Devlin and MacGreevy in particular (because here Dawe speaks of Kinsella as well) to his sense of a *creative* response; rather we might speak of it as a negative response, as an expression of lack more than a commitment to something particular. In addition, while it is commonplace to read mid-century Irish poets in terms of the 'elsewhere' Dawe describes, MacGreevy, and Devlin in particular, do not end up wholly embracing continental styles any more than they accepted Revivalist ones. Instead of the "creative imaginative space beyond" tradition, the poetry that emerges from this period writes around an absence—the absence of an aesthetic model adequate to the social and cultural moment—in ways that defy attempts at categorization. A rejection of Yeats is not necessarily an embrace of Joyce, and an uneasiness with available aesthetic strategies does not necessarily mean the creation of an entirely new school. While stylistically there is not much to link Devlin and MacGreevy the ground of desire (or post-desire, in MacGreevy's case) and despair is common to both. Irish modernists did write poetry out of a genuine attempt to engage the questions and realities of mid-century Ireland and Europe. They

did not, however, as Dawe argues here, do so out of a desire for “self-definition,” the self undergoes a modernist unraveling here just as in modernism everywhere.

What Dawe gets right, however, is the “absence of influence,” which is the essay’s title, and the sense of distance a reader of Devlin’s encounters, which Dawe reads in the context of Devlin’s life as an ex-patriot: “His poems . . . are often set in exotic climates and unusual settings but running through them there is a perpetual sense of distance, of not being fixed in one native place but feeling free of it” (Dawe Absence 132). I would argue that this sense of distance comes across aesthetically as well as geographically, for both Devlin and MacGreevy; and that “freedom” might be better described as “discomfort,” as neither poet is able to be “free” of the Revival simply by virtue of his discomfort with it. Brian Coffey writes about Devlin as a “Poet of Distance,” similarly arguing for a freedom associated with, in this case, distance from native politics even when the subject matter is local (“The Tomb of Michael Collins”): “Devlin, who well knew what role Plato’s ideal state would have imposed on poets, understood very well that to aim at poems—he would not have allowed that a man or woman can *decide* to, undertake to, write a poem—implies a freedom that neither reasons of state nor policing power can be permitted to restrain or constrain” (Coffey Distance 141). One might substitute the policing power of *tradition* here, especially as deValera’s rhetoric indeed intended to advance it. Again, though, “freedom,” which Coffey formulates as “reserve, placing a man at a distance from others,” does not give way to something “new” any more than it dismantles the hegemony of the “old.” Instead one might define freedom in this case as Beckett does in his analysis of Devlin’s *Intercessions*: “The time is perhaps not altogether too green for the vile suggestion that art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear, any more than the light of day (or night) makes the subsolar, -lunar, and ‘stellar excrement.’ Art is the sun,

moon, and stars of the mind, the whole mind” (Beckett Notes 94). In other words, these poets were free in the sense that they were willing to throw themselves out of the “world” and into the universe, having found the world, poetically (and for MacGreevy, literally), uninhabitable.

Irish poets were not unique in their ambivalence; Valentine Cunningham has described the thirties in general as a decade of what he calls the “anxiety of influence” (Cunningham 11). Though he speaks specifically of English and Russian writing it is clear that Irish writers were in the same predicament, and indeed the whole of Europe can be said to have plunged into a state of similar anxiety. Adorno recognizes this principle as fundamental to modern art, but extends it past anxiety over specific traditions to a reworking of the very concept of tradition. “Tradition itself, as a medium of historic movement, depends essentially on economic and social structures and is qualitatively transformed along with them. The attitude of contemporary art toward tradition, usually reviled as a loss of tradition, is predicated on the inner transformation of the category of tradition itself” (Adorno 20-21). In this light the hand-wringing of a frustrated Devlin, as we shall see, seems less Hamletesque and more appropriate to the movements of history: a recent world war in which Irish citizens participated as individuals—or as Brits—rather than as Irishmen; radical political realignments within Ireland over relatively short interval; and a tension between the desire for economic prosperity through trade and for isolationism in service of cultural preservation.<sup>2</sup> A culture which was experiencing a crisis over tradition would certainly produce a poetry that did the same.

It is important at the outset to define the parameters of study as they relate to the teetering body of work that attempts to define modernism while acknowledging the diversity of, and

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these cultural tensions, see Terence Brown’s *Ireland: a Social and Cultural History, 1922-2002*. London: Harper Perennial, 2004.

contradictions in, modernisms as they emerge in different cultural and temporal spaces. We might begin with Erich Auerbach's reading of Virginia Woolf's "The Brown Stocking," where he defines modernism in terms of a "multipersonal representation of consciousness," (Auerbach 536) in the place of a unified subjective aiming at an objective reality. In Auerbach's formulation, this 'reality' is already fragmented due to the rapidly changing nature of modern life, and he praises modernism's "disintegration and dissolution of external realities for a richer and more essential interpretation of them" (Auerbach 545). MacGreevy's war poetry is a stunning example of the ways some literary modernisms resist an assimilation of consciousness and a comprehensive interpretation of external events. In the same vein, Andrew Ross asserts that "any history of modernist poetry" should address "the whole series of successive modernist attempts to eliminate subjectivity from poetic form and language in order to establish a discourse that is assumed to be more authentic or 'true' to our experience of the natural world" (Ross xv). Devlin's and MacGreevy's rejection of their poetic inheritances (even when such hand-me-downs were modernisms themselves) and engagement with timely subject matter (such as modern warfare) echoes this quest for authenticity and truth-telling. And yet while some modernisms sought to reassert the revelatory language of poetry as the path to truth, as did Laura Riding Jackson,<sup>3</sup> Devlin and MacGreevy remained skeptical that such a path ultimately led anywhere at all.

Both poets were in this way "modernist mourners" as described by Patricia Rae, who rejects the characterization of modernist writers as irresponsibly isolationist:

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<sup>3</sup> See Jerome McGann's *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993.

The imperative to find an ethically satisfactory response to loss, whether through resisting the closure of mourning or seeking the alternative of irrational forgiveness, drives various experiments regarded as signatures of modernist poetry: notably, the quest for substitutes for conceptual language and regular syntax, the self-conscious assumption of personae that articulate feeling indirectly, and the rendering of agonized inner dialogue. The famously “split,” sometimes manifold modernist subject, speaking indirectly and ironically through objective correlatives and multiple personae, becomes a figure haunted by Derridean specters, and thus one whose losses cannot be assimilated by the *status quo*. . . . When set against the background of discourses of public mourning that reinforce injustice and sow the conditions for future grieving, however, by denying personhood to many of the lost, or by encouraging nationalism, militarism, and retribution, these strategies do not seem irresponsible retreats into privacy and madness, but rather conscientious objections, or refusals to participate in excitable speech. (Rae 38)

Irish modernist poets wrote in a culture for which a specifically nationalist *status quo* hung thickly over its literature, and so the experience of a war poet and a diplomat contemplating the rapid changes of both Europe and Ireland—most of them to the detriment of living things—contradicted it at every turn. And yet their flight from the *status quo*, physically and poetically, does not as Rae observes, constitute desertion, but can be interpreted as reasonable—even when not reasoned—responses to what had become intolerable.

Of course all of this writing was taking place at a crucial moment in the formation of Irish national identity, a time in which Irish cultural nationalism asserted itself as the leading

producer and regulator of cultural capital. Though the project of the Revival, at least as far as Yeats was concerned, was not to create a smooth-surfaced, unidimensional sense of Irishness (Kiberd 119)—which perhaps is a strategy appropriate to having been regarded by a ruling power as such—cultural nationalism as a larger movement sought to simplify Irish identity.

Mid-twentieth century Irish poetry grappled with Modernism (Modernism as a movement defined by a set of styles and strategies; and modernism as a set of *responses* to modernization) both as it took shape in Europe and in its implications for literature in Ireland. Two factors made Modernism problematic for Irish poets: first, industrialization came late to Ireland compared to neighboring countries; and second, the lack of a robust native market for Irish literature precluded significant and widely-read discussions about literary innovation (aside from the possible moral and political dangers of innovation as an import). In many ways literary exploration of Modernism came late to Ireland, which contributed to the peculiarity of the Irish response. Because of their remove from the centers of continental literary modernisms, and because of the width of the “Modernism” umbrella under which many modernisms operate, Irish poets of this period produced a set of exploratory refusals in their interrogations of style and poetic form. In addition, they wrote in a climate of political upheaval which exacerbated the pitch of conversations about the nature of Irishness. The focus of the Revival had been to both revive and reinvent a sense of Irishness through art that would, some hoped, revive and reinvent the Irish themselves; but though this work came during a time of political strife, its energy clearly flagged after the onset of the Civil War. Yeats’ later poetry moves toward Modernism in more outward-looking ways than his earlier, more Celtocentric poetry, but it would take the poets who came after him to fully engage Modernism and Irish literature’s relationship to it.

Criticism of Irish poetry of this period often attempts to fit the poets into existing literary categories. MacGreevy and Devlin have long been assumed the “modernists” by virtue of the experimental nature of their poetry, while Clarke and Kavanagh, as “anti-Yeatsians,” are too conventional in form to be seriously considered as modernists, as if *not* being a “modernist” at that time was synonymous with not writing good or serious poetry. Salkeld falls into the sometimes-anthologized “woman-poet” category, with the occasional reference to her peripheral relationship with modernism.

The problem with these attempts at categorization is that they treat the Irish poets of this period as *a priori* secondary to their continental counterparts. Studies normally situate the individual poets (or two at a time, rarely) in relation to either already-famous Irish prose (notably Joyce), to Yeats and the Literary Revival, which pre-dates this period by decades, or continental and American poetry of the same period. The poets are rarely read *together*, in relation to *one another*, and when they do, the larger critical framework is inevitably an already-established literary tradition. When this kind of positioning gives way, however, to reading practices which take into consideration a whole body of poetry, the room that would otherwise have been used up for either cries for the legitimization of the poetry, or claims that the poetry is quite good because it adheres to certain already-established criteria can give way to serious, comprehensive close reading that must form the foundation for any detailed consideration of the poetry of this period as a whole. Second, the features of the poetry that are common *only to the body of Irish poetry of this period* emerge and become clear. If the poetry is only studied in relation to other poetry which has only some cultural background in common, those cultural realities which are unique to Ireland—Civil War, partition, late industrialization, non-participation in WWII, the peculiar relationship between Church and state in Ireland, to name only a fraction of them—will be



missed. For that poetry which speaks in plain terms about such cultural realities, as “The Great Hunger,” more serious criticism exists; yet the centrality of cultural hunger in that particular case so overwhelms the attention of critics that subtler but no less powerful critiques of religiosity and more importantly, the urging for its transformations, are overlooked. When this poetry is read in relation to poetry of the same cultural context, other features of poetry contemporary to it sheds light on those aspects of the poetry that would otherwise remain in the shadows. To return to the role of spirituality and religion in Kavanagh’s most famous poem, for example, treatments of the same in Devlin’s and Clarke’s poetry is instructive; attention to what is obvious in their work brings to light what is subtle in his. But it need not be even that difficult in Kavanagh’s case: his own “Lough Derg” poem, when read next to the “Great Hunger” and Devlin’s “Lough Derg” poem, provides a substantial portion of that illumination.

The solution to the problem of underreading is not to insist that Irish poetry of this period is equal or superior to continental and American poetry of the same time period; it is to take it seriously through careful reading that considers both its unique cultural context and the way it functions as a teeming but interrelated whole. The hard-to-miss optimism in Salkeld’s writing makes it easier to notice the subtler attempts at the creation of a new set of terms for cultural life in Ireland as they are carefully developed in Beckett, Kavanagh, and Clarke; and recognition of the profound tone of resignation in MacGreevy’s poetry tempers Salkeld’s enthusiasm so that the complexities of her optimism become apparent. Next to other modernist literature of the period, Beckett’s poetry hardly seems crass, but read in the context of an Irish climate of silence about the body and the absence of crude bodily functions in other Irish poetry of this period (excepting MacGreevy, for whom dead and dying bodies are at the forefront), his insistence upon excreting

and aging bodies becomes an indictment of a certain kind of humanism and an advancement of another.

The other major advantage of this kind of reading, which treats an historic period of a particular geographic and cultural location (inasmuch as cultures are sites of meaning) as the ground from which a particular body of work emerges, especially when that work is varied in style, theme and approach, is that those contexts in which individual poets have previously been awkwardly placed start themselves to change. The best example of the transformative power of adjacency is the extent to which these poets unravel and multiply the term “modernism.”

Devlin’s tendency to amass modernist strategies into uneasy collectives within single poems (“Now” and “Communication from the Eiffel Tower”) emphasizes the diversity of modernism to the extent that “modernism” as a term that could coherently describe a literary movement starts to unravel, particularly because Devlin so mercilessly unarms each modernism he represents.

Salkeld’s poetry disrupts modernism in a different way by juxtaposing conventionality in poetic form with the breezy integration of details of modern life (trams, taxis, radios). Clarke’s poetry emphasizes the power of tradition and primitive energy to a much greater extent than that champion of the wedding of tradition and modernism, T.S Eliot ever did; but the result is a poetry that moves forward to engage the issues of modern life. The question of whether or not individual poets in this study qualify as “modernist” is less important than the challenge they pose to modernism itself. Of course the concept of modernisms as a plural is hardly new; there is a good deal of writing on non-continental and American forms of modernism that challenges and disrupts the term as it came to be solidified and domesticated during its heyday in mid-century.

There are a number of reasons the Irish challenge to the unity of modernism is significant, however. First, Ireland’s ambivalent position as both a colonized subaltern country *and* as an

emerging first-world country moving into the world economy means that it does not fit into existing categories in relation to modernism and the continent/America, which means that the danger is to dismiss it as either a contributor to first-world modernism or as a disruptive force to it. Second, the poetry of this period, with all its ambivalence toward modernism, was written simultaneously to the solidification of modernism. This simultaneity not only adds a potential explanation to its lack of readership—as its challenges to modernism as a unified entity would hardly be taken seriously as modernism—but undermines the notion that there ever was unity in the concept of modernism in the first place. Third-world challenges to first-world modernisms would come much later leading up to, accompanying, and flourishing after the revolutions starting in the early 1960s; the Irish challenge comes earlier.

But why does this challenge to the unity of modernism on the part of Irish poetry take place? It is true that Devlin, MacGreevy, and Beckett spent enough time on the continent to naturally be participants in the literary scenes there, but more powerful than that (and acknowledging that some poets of the period stayed in Ireland and those who did not wrote about Ireland) is the fact that these poets were already writing against notions of monolith and definition. The overwhelming cultural tone, set primarily by public officials and outspoken operatives of the Irish Church was, as we have previously discussed, one of isolation, unyielding traditionalism, and insularity. One of the thorniest tasks for Irish poets of this period was to write themselves out of a culture of stagnation borne of staling nationalist rhetoric and wariness toward modernization and innovation. Critics disagree about the effectiveness of censorship in silencing innovative voices and blocking out corrupting foreign influences, but every poet in this study treats the discourse of cultural protectionism as a potent force with potentially repressive consequences. Each poet offers hers or his own remedy for such circumstances under which

writing had to take place; Clarke finds new possibilities in older forms of Irish poetry, Kavanagh asserts a revitalizing spirituality, Beckett and MacGreevy demand the reader to attend to human bodies, Salkeld champions the soul, and Devlin values a deep sense of belief free from dogmatism. The extent to which these assertions can be thought of as “modernist,” particularly because modernism as we know it in this era of criticism has been domesticated for some time, is less important than considering the ways mid-century Irish poetry resists anti-modernizing impulses without resorting to literary fundamentalism in the other direction. The poets’ strenuous efforts against this stultifying tone make their challenges to a unified modernism all the more robust, because their work takes on the very concept of ideology, from the narrow definition of womanhood in Salkeld to Devlin’s objections to fascism *and* unified literary movements in one single poem, to Clarke’s and Kavanagh’s disgust with the Irish Church.

Theirs was the kind of response, however, that did not closely resemble movements in other countries and cultural contexts against ideology; despite its vigor, Irish poetry of this period insists upon keeping the valuable energies that go into the forming of ideology, and in no way is this more apparent than the concept of spirituality and belief. All of the poets in this study, in fact, with the exception perhaps of MacGreevy and Devlin (who nevertheless value belief) offer belief as a possible antidote to ideology. All insist, however, that belief should take a form unshackled from religiosity and focus on the dynamism already present in Irish forms of spirituality. For Clarke and Devlin this means recalling periods in Irish history during which the passions ignited by belief had not yet been snuffed out by a ubiquitously institutionalized Church; for Clarke in particular it meant a time when both Christian and pagan energies combined to form a dynamic form of Irish spirituality, the threads of which still run through the fabric of contemporary Irish culture. For Salkeld, belief and spirituality reorient the individual

toward her own soul to begin the process of unshackling oneself from the constraints of life as a woman in conservative Ireland.

Similarly, the persistence of the importance of Irish soil was reclaimed by these poets as that which existed outside and beyond the boundaries of the field.<sup>4</sup> MacGreevey places Irish landscape in the context of the continental battlefields of World War I to disengage the conflation of soil with home. In this way he refigures landscape as an open field for the surface play of possibility (such as a reimagining of “home” as a concept). Salkeld’s urban, suburban, and rural movements (coastal and inland) via tram and taxi in her poetry, while providing rich description of both natural phenomena and modern innovations, reinvents Irish land as varied: backward- and forward-looking, old and new, confining and transportative. Susan Schreibman writes about the mistaken notion that late twentieth-century Irish women poets were the first to penetrate a male-dominated literary machine and chronicles acts of intentional exclusion (from the 1970s on) of mid-century Irish women poets from important publications (310). Reading the poem by Rhoda Coghill I briefly discuss in the Salkeld chapter, Schriebman notes that “For many of these women protagonists . . . the landscape is a place of silences, entrapment, and domestic violence” (319). Salkeld and her female contemporaries, writing from a specific and underrepresented subject position, transform the concept of landscape in ways that are important for women poets to follow. Mebh Muckian, for example, makes ample use of landscape imagery to work through layered enclosures from womb to subject/object relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> The field as a concept in post-independence Ireland stressed the confined nature of Irish identity, in that that field contained the Irish self.

This willingness to keep the remnants of those ideas and energies that had hardened into ideologies played an important role in the history of Irish poetry insofar as mid-century Irish poetry made possible the continuation of Irish poetry as a unique form of cultural expression. For poets of this period simply to have destroyed those energies would have insisted that poets of the 1960s and beyond would have had to argue for their recovery rather than insisting on innovations of their own. We might think, for instance, how the poetry of Ciaran Carson, whose poetry in *The Twelfth of Never* (2001) moves back and forth between Ireland and Japan, benefits from the complexity the concept of home takes on in mid-century poetry. In Carson's poetry it is not simply a case of increasingly internationalized poetry but of a multiplied (and abstracted) sense of home space already explored by MacGreevy. Or consider Eavan Boland's depictions of suburban life from the perspective of a woman who both writes and raises children, ground that had already been opened by Salkeld.

One of the difficulties with a study of Irish modernism in poetry is the paucity of the body of work available for study. Though MacGreevy's *Poems* is among the best of mid-century modernist poetry, it is the only volume of poetry MacGreevy ever published; he was more productive as an art critic than as a poet. Similarly, Devlin published only three volumes of poetry during his lifetime, much of which was spent as a successful diplomat. More famous than the other two, Beckett produced very little poetry. Indeed it may be Beckett himself who has given the most attention and respect to the Irish modernist poets of the 1930s. His essay, "Recent Irish Poetry" praises MacGreevy's work as an example of what was best in Irish poetry of the day.

Another difficulty seems to lie in misplaced emphasis. Even Gerald Dawe, in "The Rest in Silence: Devlin, Coffey, and MacGreevy," who correctly observes that "the emphasis falls

upon the personality of a poet instead of where it rightly belongs—with the poetry” spends almost the entirety of his essay’s MacGreevy section on biographical analysis. Certainly biography has its place in literary scholarship, but when it serves mainly to legitimize poets for a skeptical audience instead of offering sound criticism to the same purpose, it is to the detriment of the poets’ advancement.

A third difficulty emerges from the tendency to overlook individual artists’ achievements when they do not constitute a “movement” as such and the culture does not appear to reflect or support their efforts. The main culprit behind this dismissal is Terence Brown, whose use of Eugene’s Linn’s “four characteristics of modernist art forms”(Brown 31) to argue for the absence of true modernism in mid-twentieth-century Ireland passes over the poetry of Devlin and MacGreevy with hardly a glance. Both poets engage in a high degree of “Aesthetic Self-Consciousness or Self-Reflexiveness,” in which the world of the poem is ruptured frequently by the self-conscious poet; both employ “Simultaneity, Juxtaposition, or ‘Montage;” both are poetries of “Paradox, Ambiguity, and Uncertainty;” and, at least in MacGreevy’s poetry, in an attempt to create the distance necessary for the contemplation of the realities of world war, engage in “Dehumanization.” Irish modernism scores the weakest on the stylistic elements of this list, but not to the degree that their contributions to the larger world of modernism should be rejected out of hand. If that were the case a number of other modernists would have to be left behind as well. Brown’s dismissal of MacGreevy, in his essay for Patricia Coughlan and Alex’s Davis collection on Irish modernist poetry of the 1930s, rests solely on an essay MacGreevy writes on Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” which he finds unremarkable, and *not* on a reading of MacGreevy’s poetry. In addition Brown lumps all the poets in the period together, using Austin Clarke’s rejection of the Revival (whose complex relationship with modernism Brown outlines)

as proof that “disillusioned, post-revolutionary literary Ireland seems to have thrown out the modernist baby with the Romantic bathwater of the Literary Revival.” The most he will allow is that “the 1930s [produced] only a few writers, like genetic sports, who wrote in varying degrees of awareness of the Revival’s former originality or of modernism’s revolution of the word” (Brown 38). Such an account cannot possibly have seriously considered the modernist poetry of Devlin and MacGreevy. In Brown’s cultural history of the period, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2001*, the blame goes largely to the strong religious conservatism of the period. Tim Armstrong cautions against this kind of analysis, noting that similar cultural strictures were strong in other European countries at the time without resulting in the absence of experimental modernism (Armstrong 46). Armstrong himself stops short of claiming modernism for Ireland whole-heartedly, however, primarily because of what he reads as MacGreevy’s movement toward a “true Catholic collectivity” and retention of the lyric voice (Armstrong 56). Brown’s and Armstrong’s analyses raise the question of whether or not modernist texts must adhere to all (not just most, which would certainly qualify Devlin and MacGreevy) central tenets of European modernism to be worthy of inclusion into the highly respected modernist canon. The implication seems to be that not having boldly led a large and convincing experimental movement in Ireland, the modernist poetry of mid-twentieth-century Ireland is a lesser modernism than its counterparts in Europe. Most arguments of this sort leave Beckett out completely as if he were not Irish at all and could simply be excised from the discussion.

I contend that for Irish modernists, both inherited native and continental styles were inadequate to engage with the current historical and social circumstances, including the unique role of Ireland in WWI, questions of nationalism and national identity surrounding Irish



independence, and rapid social change; and that the resulting poetry is an important addition to the histories of both Irish poetry and literary modernism.

D.H. Lawrence, a contemporary of the poets I examine in the dissertation, writes

But there is another kind of poetry: the poetry of that which is at hand: the immediate present. In the immediate present there is no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished. The strands are all flying, quivering, intermingling into the web, the waters are shaking the moon. There is no round, consummate moon on the face of running water, nor on the face of the unfinished tide. There are no gems of the living plasm. The living plasm vibrates unspeakably, it inhales the future, it exhales the past, it is the quick of both, and yet it is neither. There is no plasmic finality, nothing crystal, permanent. If we try to fix the living tissue, as the biologists fix it with formation, we have only a hardened bit of the past, the bygone life under our observation. . . . The seething poetry of the incarnate Now is supreme, beyond even the everlasting gems of the before and after. In its quivering momentaneity it surpasses the crystalline, pearl-hard jewels, the poems of the eternities. Do not ask for the qualities of the unfading timeless gems. Ask for the whiteness which is the seethe of mud, ask for that incipient putrescence which is the skies falling, ask for the never-pausing, never-ceasing life itself. (Lawrence)

Though much of Lawrence's discussion concerns free verse (like that of Walt Whitman), his celebration of immediacy in poetry speaks powerfully to the predicament of mid-century poets in Ireland. Poets wrote after the Revival was spent, of course, and though it was diverse in style and subject matter, and does not constitute anything like a coherent movement, poetry in mid-

twentieth-century Ireland—the last decade of Yeats’s life to the dawn of the economic and cultural revitalization of 1960s—is a poetry which, to a large extent, recognizes and contemplates Ireland’s present. Nowhere is this presentness more pronounced than in Kavanagh’s *Great Hunger*, a poem that both contemplates the failures of a cultural idealism that leads to stagnation and death and, I argue, proposes a way to engender growth and nurture possibility. In service of an ideal of growth over cultural withering, Kavanagh presents a version of Christianity that departs sharply from the Pauline Church of his day but nevertheless comes out of an intimate knowledge of the alternative versions of spirituality already present in the Irish peasant culture in which Kavanagh was brought up.

Blanaid Salkeld’s poetry is perhaps the most overtly “present” of all the poetry in this examination, not only because she so deftly incorporates artifacts of modern life in it (trams, cabs, radios, washing machines, typewriters) but because she gives voice to the movements of particularly lived life in a particular time: the female Irish sometimes-expatriate poet, perhaps never to be read, writing through and out of tangled identities. In Salkeld we find some of the first examples of the presence of non-Western images in Irish poetry, which would find its way into the culturally polyglot poems of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century poets Ciaran Carson, Paul Muldoon, and others. Certainly there was eastern mystical influence in the poetry that came out of the Revival-era Theosophical Societies, but there is a difference between a stylistic inspiration and the presence, in Salkeld’s case, of specific cultural practices and artifacts.

Perhaps, though, Irish poets of this period were most present in the way Lawrence imagines not for a lack of poetic structure—Salkeld writes almost exclusively in sonnets, after all, and Clarke makes ample use of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Gaelic poetic conventions—but because their writing goes in such disparate directions. Not only is there no school or movement to speak of,

but the scholar is at pains to find stylistic or thematic similarities between poets. Even the “modernists” (Devlin, MacGreevy, and Beckett), as critics have reluctantly grouped them, could be said to belong to one group only by virtue of the fact that they all engage with modernism on some level. Devlin, for instance, experiments with both modernist and classical styles and finds them all wanting, while MacGreevy explores themes of alienation and homelessness and Beckett attempts to remake our idea of what it means to be human in the world. As for the others, there is even less consistency, from the reinvented myths of Clarke to the sometimes feminist sonnets of Salkeld to the bitter soil-scratching (with hope) of Kavanagh. This variousness among poets (and in many cases, particularly Salkeld’s, among the poems of just one poet) is appropriate to an emerging sense of Irish identity following centuries of invasion, colonization, civil war, and continual sectarian conflict; to a country accustomed to cultural hybridity through exile, emigration, war, and settlement; and, on an international level, to a time for which nearly every decade brought fresh political alignments and social movements. For Irish poetry of the middle years to have formed one school (or indeed for even one school to have formed!) would have necessitated a sense of how Irish literature, and Ireland and the world *should be* rather than what it was: various and tumultuous.

There is one notable exception to this presentness in mid-century poetry, and that is the persistence of the classical ideal. Most of the poets of this period, but primarily Clarke and Devlin, maintain a kind of nostalgia for an poetic era—one that neither of them lived through, but merely experienced through the pages of other writers—, the features of which, if it were available to the modern writer, could address the concerns of the present day. Alas, it could not be so; but the one poet who failed to recognize the incongruity of classicism with modern Ireland still managed to transform classical ideals, specifically the use of myth, into tools which could

produce a culturally relevant poetry. Indeed it was the aim of many Revivalists to make the old myths fresh and new, and to humanize mythic figures, but it was Clarke who made these figures truly contemporary in some cases and approaching revolutionarily so—as in his writing of mythic Irish women—in others.

Mid-twentieth-century Irish poetry departs from Revival-era poetry in three distinct ways: the presence in much of the poetry of either a Catholic sensibility and spirituality or, at the very least, a deep engagement with the notion of belief; lack of anxiety about cultural preservation; and ambivalence about the processes of modernization. In addition, its identification as “Anglo-Irish” poetry begins to reflect the language of the poetry more than the identity of the poet. Because the Revival’s energies could not sustain its aims, and because it so quickly became outmoded, something more flexible, probative, and relevant took its place; and in doing so, mid-century poetry enabled the rich flowering of later decades. Indeed what has come to pass in the last seventy years is something quite like what Yeats had envisioned: a national poetry (in both English and Irish) rooted in the cultural experience of Irish people. Contemporary Irish poetry is perhaps more complex than Yeats could have imagined, particularly in the variousness of the signifier “Irish,” and it is mid-century poetry that allows it to be so.

In other words, what mid-century poetry did for contemporary poetry was to disallow the sort of hardening that comes with the forced, premature molding of a national culture that is in the midst of waves of upheaval. Certainly Yeats’s vision for a national poetry did not involve a stagnant definition of Irishness; his was, in fact, highly resistant to polarizing nationalist impulses. But despite his wishes, political expediencies, particularly those of Eamon de Valera, encouraged the hardening of the Revivalist vision. Were it not for the poets who wrote with great

difficulty, both in terms of reception and financial reward, in mid-century, this hardening might have killed Irish poetry altogether. Mid-century Irish poetry carries with it those aspects of Revivalism which could survive and altered what was untenable, and in doing so laid the groundwork for what was to come.

Mid-twentieth-century Irish poetry stands as a body of literature worthy of serious critical engagement. Poets of this period wrote in the immediate aftermath of a civil and a world war, and wrote through another world war. They wrote as citizens and representatives (as in Denis Devlin, the career diplomat) of a newly configured small nation; they both contributed to and departed from European literary modernism; they took on thorny matters of Church, State and belief without falling prey to polarization or oversimplification; they were homebodies (Patrick Kavanagh, Austin Clarke) and exiles (Devlin, Thomas MacGreevy, Samuel Beckett) and Anglo-Irish hybrids (Blanaid Salkeld). They kept open the painful wounds of cultural rupture and national identity crisis, and in doing so, created a poetry that spoke powerfully about the struggles of the middle decades.

## -MODERNISM “NOW:” DENIS DEVLIN

In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, Margorie Perloff sees modernism as responding to the dilemma of how to articulate the relationship between the world of the poet and the world of objects. One way to respond to this problem, as Baudelaire did, is to create a stable poetic world with internal organization that offers an antidote to an increasingly chaotic and disconnected reality. “Every image contributes to the sense of mystery and artifice, thus pointing to a stable and coherent center” (Perloff *Indeterminacy* 65). For example, Wallace Stevens’ poetry advances the idea of poetic wholeness as the panacea to an era without belief that makes its own truths in its stead (Perloff *Dance* 3).<sup>5</sup> But although the overarching imperative of Baudelaire and Stevens is similar, Baudelaire’s work (and subsequently Eliot’s) disrupts some elements of form, notably syntax and verse form, while Stevens prefers conventional, recognizable forms.

Against Baudelaire and Stevens Perloff posits Rimbaud and Pound as preferable alternatives in the response to modernist dilemmas. Unlike Baudelaire, Rimbaud’s “poetic of indeterminacy” offers no organizing principle for its symbols, preferring the materiality of the

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<sup>5</sup> It should be clear here that Perloff is writing specifically of the *criticism* surrounding Stevens’ work (Harold Bloom, Hillis Miller, Helen Vendler, Frank Kermode and others), though those of Stevens’ own words that she includes support the critical apparatus.

words themselves (Perloff Indeterminacy 55, 58) and their interplay on the surface of the poem. Perloff chooses Rimbaud's star descendant, John Ashbery, to illustrate the Rimbaudian poetic. His "These Laocustrine Cities"

blocks out all attempts to rationalize its imagery, to make it conform to a coherent pattern. In Ashbery's verbal landscape, fragmented images appear one by one—cities, sky, swans, tapering branches, violent sea, mountain—without coalescing into a symbolic network. (10)

The images in Ashbery's poem create, in his words for the poetry of Gertrude Stein, an "open field of narrative possibilities" (11). The subject, which in the poetry of Stevens and Eliot might be relied upon to control these images, becomes merely another object in this field. Thus subject and object collapse, as the world of images itself, devoid of that "stable and coherent symbolic center" is all that the poem offers. The images come from within, as if the poet is trying to convey what it feels like to be those things, rather than an "I" experiencing their effects (61). In Ashbery as in Rimbaud, the modernist anxiety over the relationship between self and world is resolved as a dissolution of self; and its corollary, the relationship between poetry and world, is resolved as the dissolution of the world, or at least the obliteration of its importance to the poem. "The symbolic evocations generated by words on the page are no longer grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not" (18). In other words, the world exists, and the poem exists, but there is no *determinate* correspondence between them. Indeterminacy is not to be confused with elitism, however; even Eliot, whose references were obscure, nevertheless referred to real things, and organized those real things according to a (highly esoteric, highly specialized) symbolic structure

(13). Neither is indeterminacy synonymous with a retreat into poetry as an escape from the “real” world for which high modernists are so famous. Rather

Art becomes play, endlessly frustrating our longing for certainty . . . poetic texts like “These Lacustrine Cities” or “Ping” [Beckett] derive force from their refusal to “mean” in conventional ways . . . to use, as does Ashbery, shifting pronouns and false causal connectives is itself an implicit commentary on the nature of identity and causality. (34)

“Identity and causality” are “eal” and need not be addressed through a realist correspondence between subject and object.

Devlin’s early *First Poems* (1930) struggles between a nostalgia for classical poetry and, like MacGreevy, a skepticism about the ability of any kind of poetry to address fundamental questions about life and death that arose out of modernization, war, and Irish ambivalence surrounding cultural identity. Indeterminacy, which in Devlin’s poetry is his self-aware and performative refusal to adhere consistently to one style, marks this collection as modernist in both local (Irish) and broader (continental) ways. The collection heaves back and forth between styles and evaluations of styles, becoming progressively less “determinant.”

“O Paltry Melancholy” laments the passing of an almost instinctual classical passion. Mary of Magdalen, Orpheus, and Deirdre are joined by a lioness who has lost her cubs. In a poem that laments the loss of a style of mourning drawn from three classical traditions—medieval Christian, Greco-Roman mythical, and Irish Gaelic—Devlin’s last stanza presents the alternative to the richness and passion of classical tradition, which as we will see in the collection’s “Now,” is emblematic of the aesthetic vapidness of Devlin’s age.

O paltry melancholy,



dragging a songless boredom through sunless and stormless days  
images firing his brain of never accomplished tasks  
disarming smile of humility hiding coward delays  
on tiptoe in dreams beside action, sophister strutting in masks  
of laughter, of child-like pagan of curl-lipped polished doubt,  
a timid traveler trailing slow steps and about  
considering which route he shall take at the crossing of ways. (lines 29-36)

Not so the mourning of the Magdalene, whose “savage exultation” (6) is a stranger to doubt; nor  
Orpheus, whose sorrow “was the silver sorrow of the poets’/ that bends o’er its own pain  
embracingly” (13-14), the antithesis of paltry melancholy’s timidity. Compare this deflated  
Hamlet to Deirdre, who

drank voluptuously  
the hot and wrathful blood of Naoise, her slain Lord.  
Fierce was her sorrow; measured ecstasy  
swaying her golden-fleshed body  
from warm throat poured the keen.(15-19)

The style of mourning Devlin values here is rooted in devotion, fearlessly embracing the reality  
of death and reveling in its richness. Devlin’s reference to the “child-like pagan of curl-lipped  
polished doubt” is not posited here as an argument for a specifically religious devotion but an  
unqualified commitment to an object of desire, even through that object’s death—indeed,  
particularly after the death. Instead the sophister’s life is “stormless.” The poem itself ends on  
the sophister without the poet having made a determination about which direction to take his  
poem. Had he been fully committed to classical forms of mourning, might he have returned to

them for a final stanza? And yet the poem is an elegy. The classical tradition, as we will see in “Now,” is no longer fully available to the contemporary poet. No wonder it ends with the bored, spineless sophister—to do otherwise would be to pretend that classicism were still viable.

“Before Lepanto: The Turkish Admiral Speaks to His Fleet” follows as an attempt to tap into the classical sensibility but fails; each stanza ends incompletely, sometimes abruptly (“That’s Christian canon crackling. Do you hear” [26]) and sometimes trailing off (“and laggard day that sprawls/ where aftermath of sluggard foam/ crawls” [6-8]). The admiral tries five times in five short numeraled sections mocking the epic. But the admiral is no longer a young hero and he cannot get up the steam to carry the poem. His calls to action (“Old watch-dogs half-asleep . . . come, put on youth again” [14; 24]) fail to inspire the kind of blood-red passion Devlin celebrates in “Melancholy.” It ends with a too-trite benediction for the poem’s earlier angst: “Come, brother ships, be comforted, for see/In benediction of your travailed years/The evening spreads fair sunlight on your sails” (49-51)

“Adam’s House” reflects Devlin’s disappointment over the death of classical tradition in ways that echo MacGreevy’s musings on the limitations of language. Here the conflict is not between kinds of poetry but between poetry and dogmatism, which confirms the extra-religious sense of devotion in “Melancholy.” In a formal strategy he will employ again in “Now,” Devlin counters a main poetic text with a subordinate rhyming text, set in italics marginally to the plain type. The marginal text is fragments of and finally full versions of poems distilling Church teachings into easy-to-remember verses for children. The first one mocks the classical tradition in its declension of “stink” (“*Stinkarum, stankarum, buck*” [6]) and in subsequent iterations the Scholasticism (“*The old Scholastics say*” [16; 23]) that would have been part of Devlin’s religious training with the Jesuits. The Scholastic emphasis on dialectic is at work in this poem,

as in “Melancholy,” with the juxtaposition of poetry with dogmatic verse, though no new thing is made of their interplay. In the end neither the speaker’s excessively poetic musings, as in

The forest’s full of murmurings and streams,  
The pool’s black wavelets creamed with froth reluce,  
Beneath blue numerous leaves cold moonlight streams  
On moss-embedded gleaming limbs diffuse  
Of sleeping hamadryads mist with fauns,  
Brown Pan yawns, mutters, drops his flute and snores.  
The gods are playing on eternal lawns  
But kindly mortals sleep on fronded floors. (7-14)

nor the simplistic dogmatism of the rhyming verses can aid the speaker in understanding life and death. In the first half of the poem, poetry is an escape for the speaker, an Eden in which to avoid the harsher truths of the rhymes. In the latter half, however, the speaker can no longer ignore these truths as he ages and then dies (“The years slipped from my shoulders/ Like life from a new-born spirit” [42; 43]). Although death allows him once again to escape the “crapulous faces of my evil deeds” (46) it is not attended by explanation, but is pure light without enlightenment. “This is the bright-fired hostel/After the tenebrous journey” (53-4) but “as when/Just men are gathered quiet in a room/And silence slowly throbs with souls; so silence/Impregnate throbbed with consciousness of us” (60-3). The silence is filled, again not with understanding but art: “Your hair was round my eyes/ The grisping silence filled/With light notes soft as milk/Of hundred harps and flutes” (64-7). The speaker is resigned to the futility of the whole exercise as he becomes not dead speaker but live poet, writing, “I’ve had my lesson again; I might have

known/Love is no talisman to the mystery” (72-3) where “love” is the music and poetry that we use to fill in the silences that theology cannot.

The end of the poem seems to suggest an alternative to both art and dogmatism as ways of understanding the mysteries of life and death and sheds some light into what Devlin might have considered a reasonable alternative to writing: “*Experience teaches, you know*” (81).

Devlin’s own biography certainly affirms the need for “experience” as he lived the majority of his days not as a professional poet but gathering “experiences” from extensive travel. Surely the cosmopolitan nature of modernism creeps into his poetry here as a counter to Irish nativism, but Devlin never develops the thought. Curiously the line appears in the same italicized and marginalized text as the rhymes, as if it were part of one. But although “experience teaches” hardly matches the authoritarian tone of the verses, the ending sneers “*you know*” as if to show up the poet for an idiot to think that anything would sufficiently replace experience as a path to knowledge and wisdom. Devlin does not follow up on the thought in this poem or the others in the collection; experience cannot be transposed; and so as an aesthetic strategy, it is unviable. This last line draws a distinction between the “experience” of romanticism, where the basis for poetic understanding is what we perceive directly through our senses, and experience as the accumulation of personally experienced events and moments. The latter is both an accretion of sensory experiences and has a social, instead of isolationist, component. Experience in this sense is the personal in the context of the social, which in this poem relates to the theological world view of the parenthetical speaker. The last line of “Adam’s House” rejects the Romantic notion of experience in favor of the socially-inflected one. But because Devlin gives the parenthetical speaker the sneer of “*you know,*” and because he has already set that voice apart as one of unyielding—and ineffectual—dogmatism; and because the more romantic sections of the poem

read as out of touch with real life in comparison; Devlin's poem rejects both senses of "experience" as the basis for a relevant poetry. What the poet dismisses is easier to discern here than what he would find acceptable, though a reader might be tempted to read his favored alternative as realism. As we see in "Now," however, Devlin will discard realism is just as insufficient as either romanticism or dogmatic religiosity.

In "Now" Devlin sounds the death knell for Western poetry, not just as an inherited aesthetic but in all its current forms. John Keats's Grecian Urn becomes the symbol of an aesthetic that has long outlived its relevance.

The Urn of the Occident is filled  
And the blue-flamed serpent is coiled around its base,  
And Pallas' bird, fixed in the sepia sky  
Moveless as marble, spreads her iris wings.  
Patient and proud mirroring of reality;  
Arrogant gathering of sense and movement and passion  
To interpret to men the profoundest soul of a man  
Disgust and tire like a long drawn-out farewell  
The Good no longer enfevers the sons of Plato,

*Pure white and azure sky*

The Hymn to Beauty is no longer chanted

*Dull cold and ivory Aphrodite. (1-12)*

In Keats's urn, all of the images are fixed, but the artist is able to suggest motion. There is a balance or interplay between the belatedness of art and its timelessness. In Devlin's rendering, there is only belatedness, as the sky takes on the sepia hue of old photographs. Athena is not just

etched in marble but takes on its motionless properties. The negative space in Keats's urn is gone in Devlin's, unavailable to be filled by new, inspired material. The Urn of the Occident stands for realist styles ("patient and proud mirroring of reality") that have nothing left to do; and so it no longer 'sings' in the way it does in Keats's poem: "The Good no longer enfevers the sons of Plato . . . The Hymn to Beauty is no longer chanted." What is chanted instead is the little rhyming ditty in italics between the lines of the main polemic in the second and third sections. As it weaves in and out of the clichéd images in section III, it serves to emphasize their triviality, as if rhyming ditties and poetic commonplaces were interchangeable. But the sub-poem also mocks the lines of the main poem, as "What's beauty, truth, life, love, what's me?" (40) is followed by the more practical "*Can we get there?*" (41) The approaches in sections II and III are no more effective than the sub-poem in addressing the present. Devlin levels the poetic playing field in this way. Devlin creates a cast of speakers who represent various forms of poetic expression in the poem, a strategy that will come into full bloom in "Communication from the Eiffel Tower." If we consider the multiplicity of voices here, particularly in their roles as interlocutors for poetic styles, we must note a tension with the poem's theme of immobility. For if the styles Devlin dismisses here were truly dead, could they continue to speak in his own poetry?

Devlin continues his mockery of Occidental art and its demise in the second section, which consists of a list of tired, clichéd images that read as if the poet closed his eyes and pointed to random lines from a beloved anthology. The first few lines bring to mind Irish poetic commonplaces,

Eternally emerald pastures of Ireland; English lanes winding  
*Onery, two-ery.*

Through smothering blossom; old book shops in Paris;

*Ziccary zan*

Larks singing in Sussex and Deridre's now bloodless lips. (13-17)

and continues with general Western European ones ("Vines in Avignon" [19], "Honor redeemed through war" [21], and "sweet things of home" [23]). These are the things, he suggests, that fill the urn. They are once-fresh images that have become stale, and there is nothing more to be done than to copy them endlessly. By mixing Irish, English, and continental clichés Devlin places the problem with all of Europe, not just Ireland.

Even so-called new approaches, which have not been around long enough to become stale, are bunk according to Devlin. The third section reads as a mockery of new schools popping up in Europe meant to dismantle the conventional poetic of stanza two.

*Oner-ery, Twoeery*

*Ziccary zan. . .*

Let us be Anarchists by all means

*How many miles is it*

Dethrone the Verb and the Substantive

*To Babylon.*

Roses do not smell sweeter than beans

*Babylon.*

Hail to the Holy Adjective!

*Three-score and ten.*

What's beauty, truth, life, love, what's me?

*Can we get there? (30-41)*

Destroy form; disrupt semantic structure; delink sign and referent; rearrange the hierarchy of parts of speech; question old ideals; to Devlin, it doesn't matter. None of the approaches he lists can stave off the inevitable, which is the urn's demise in the fourth section. Symbolism especially, which makes an appearance in the first stanza of this section, is unable to save Western art from its end, and in fact acts as the death knell itself. "The Urn of the Occident is filled/And waits for the Embalmer. . . . The Green moon and the mauve sun dead in the sepia sky/And the orange grass attend the Embalmer" (54-5; 59-60). Symbolism does not offer any new life for Western art; its images are interchangeable with the old ones. As etchings, their color cannot make them new.<sup>6</sup>

The figure of the Embalmer, which echoes "O Paltry Melancholy," emphasizes Devlin's all-encompassing critique of Western art. He is "smooth-paced, urbane" (61), the opposite of the stereotyped backwards Irish peasant who gets most of the blame for the lack of growth in Irish culture and poetry. The Embalmer is in fact modern European culture; he has "resigned hands" (62) and is therefore not interested in growth or change, though he may appear to be (as embalmers color the faces of the dead). The Embalmer is "vague, decadent" (67). When the poet instructs "Let him go" (69), he is resigned; there is no way to keep the Embalmer from being "hypnotised" by the "wooden hobby horses" (76). The hobby horses are those poetic schools mocked in section II, or other movements that come to nothing: "Roundabout roundabout roundabout round" (77) as main poem begins to take on the sing-songy quality of the sub-poem.

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<sup>6</sup>In some ways Devlin's "Now" can be read as if told in the voice of the angel from Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In "Now," dead poetic approaches pile up at the speaker's feet, and he is unable—as is Devlin, ultimately—to face away from them. The speaker of "Now" is pushed toward the future, like Benjamin's Angel of History, with his back to it.



“Now” emphasizes the extent to which Devlin was skeptical of any lingering Revivalist sense that there was a poetic that could carry Ireland (or Europe, for that matter) into the next phase of its history. In “Lough Derg” from the collection of the same name (1946), Devlin explores the efficacy of Irish discourses of religious tradition for the present moment, and unsurprisingly finds them coming up short. The poem, however, unlike “Now” is less scathing and has lost the mocking tone. It is an almost tender engagement with the role of religious tradition in Irish life from which even the speaker cannot fully extricate himself. In this way the poem complicates a commonplace division of Irish poetry in mid-century as either pro- or anti-Revivalist. The poem’s tone is critical but sympathetic, its speaker conflicted.

“Lough Derg” begins with a straightforward commentary on the belatedness of religious pilgrimage, as “glad invalids on penitential feet/Walk the Lord’s majesty like their village street” (5-6). The irony of invalids on a pilgrimage emphasizes the ineffective and wheel-spinning nature of Irish-Catholic religiosity as well as its lapse into the commonplace. Devlin includes a modest cross-section of Irish society in this most conventional pilgrimage: they are “the poor in spirit” (1), or those too void of their own will to assert anything but penitence, “the jobbers with their whiskey-angered eyes” (2), or the working-class with all its (stereotypical) vice, “the pink bank-clerks” (3) of the upper classes, and of course “the tip-hat papal counts” (3) at the very top of the social ladder. The “drab, kind women” (4) add pious, obedient Irish women to the picture. The traditional narrative is that “with mullioned Europe shattered, this Northwest/Rude-sainted island would pray it whole again,”<sup>7</sup> returning the favor of Patrick<sup>8</sup> (6-7). But the speaker is

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<sup>7</sup> The notion that Ireland’s cultural and spiritual riches can be called upon to rescue the rest of the West from repeated threats to its continuity has continued well into our own time, most notably with the 1995 publication of the popular book *How the Irish Saved Civilization* by Thomas Cahill.

skeptical of this claim. Europe's tragedies, despite religious determinism, are misfortunes, "the sacred bane of God's chance" (9-10). Devlin takes the sacredness of God and applies it to the very tragedies God has wrought. Already he is calling the religious narrative into question. In a revisionist look at the story upon which all future stories of Ireland's engagement with the rest of Europe the speaker asks, "were they [Europeans] this kind?" (12) The exchange (the gift of Christianity for the gift of cultural repair) is hardly equal in the speaker's mind; Patrick is both "thief and saint" (12), both culture-bringer and culture-stealer. On the balance sheet nothing should be owed. The Irish, the speaker implies, give beyond what is due.

But what the Irish have to offer, Devlin's speaker insists, is a hollow, ineffectual set of rituals, form without content, which mirrors the concerns he expresses for symbolism in a wider European context in "Now." As Alex Davis notes, in his reading of "Lough Derg,"

A high modernist detachment from praxis, as evinced in the elevation of formal devices to fill a space once occupied by social content, finds a spiritual corollary in a prayer the religious significance of which has gone, leaving only its 'form' as solace (Davis 65).

Devlin describes the same inevitable progression of primitive fire into soulless institution that Giambattista Vico<sup>9</sup> narrates, for what will become clearer as the poem continues is Devlin's positive valuation of belief without religiosity (which Kavanagh, Clarke, Beckett, Salkeld, and to a certain extent, MacGreevy, all share); belief was the energy behind whatever growth was

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<sup>8</sup> My reference here is to the fact that Patrick was not native to Ireland but rather came as a missionary from England.

<sup>9</sup> See Vico, Giambattista. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1984.

possible, whatever primitive connection to life as it was lived on the ground and not according to outmoded ideals and abstracted poetic forms better suited to other times and cultural contexts.

Man's gradual wisdom take  
Firefly instinct dreamed out into law;  
The prophet's jeweled kingdom down at hell  
Fires no Augustine here. Inert, they kneel;  
All is simple and symbol in their world,  
The incomprehended rendered fabulous. (15-20)

The progression of a dynamic, instinctual connection to the divine into the “inert” institutions of religiosity has its corollary in poetry as well, as Devlin demonstrates in his own poem. The third stanza begins with modest scene-setting: “Low rocks, a few weasels, lake/Like a field of burnt gorse; the rooks caw” (13-14). The burnt gorse ties the imagery to the “firefly instinct” just two lines after, and the poem transitions into polemic. Devlin thus demonstrates the movement from poetic or religious inspiration to institution. How much more exciting is it to forget about hedging in the lively origins of poetry and religion to revel in sin: “Sin teases life whose natural fruits withheld/ Sour the deprived nor bloom for timely loss” (21-2)? The loss is profound and constitutes what Davis identifies as “the problematic relationship between signifier and signified, signified and referent” (Davis 65). The inevitable shift of emphasis from signified to signifier constitutes the lifespan of any inspired movement, and in this poem it is, to contradict Davis (who argues that in the collection Devlin puts it in “religious rather than poetic terms” (Davis 65)) the lifespan of both Irish Catholicism and the contemporaneous poetic movements. As if on cue the poem swings into an impassioned bout of romantic nostalgia.

. . . the Temple trumpets

Cascaded down Thy sunny pavilions of air,  
The scroll-tongued priests, the galvanic strumpets,  
All clash and stridency gloomed upon Thy stair;  
The Pharisees, the exalted boy their power  
Sensually psalmed in Thee, their coming hour! (25-30)

Devlin's choice of archaic language foregrounds the belatedness of the style. It is appropriate here because the style coincides (poetically, if not chronologically) with the recalling of a more impassioned moment in the spiritual life of a people. The language feels old-fashioned here, surrounded by the more subdued language of the rest of the poem. But the fact of its conspicuousness should not be confused with mockery. The speaker's nostalgia is sincere. The poem's next stanzas describe (albeit in more toned-down language) a highly spiritual, pre-Christian Ireland where "Christ the Centaur in two natures whole,/ With fable and proverb joinered body and soul" (53-4) works against the "spirit bureaucracy" (60) which is "doughed in dogma" (66). Much of the remainder of the poem laments this loss: "Hell is to know our natural empire used/Wrong, by mind's moulting, brute divinities./ The vanishing tiger's saved, his blood transfused" (80-2).

The result of the loss, at least in religious terms, is that God has left the premises. "We pray to ourself" (109), the speaker says, "The metal moon, unspent/Virgin eternity sleeping in the mind,/Excites the form of prayer without content" (109-111). Curiously, though, the poem never lapses into cynicism. The last line retains some of that original fire so missed by the speaker. Until this line nothing more than a passive observer of the hollow religiosity he describes, the speaker kneels alongside the pilgrims.

Whitehorn lightens, delicate and blind,

The negro mountain, and so, knelt on her sod,

This woman beside me murmuring *My God! My God!* (112-14).

Whitehorn, or *Finnbhennach*, the bull from the Ulster Cycle who fights the bull of queen Mebh, here loses his rage. The only power the pre-Christian myths have in the present is to shade the backdrop against the present action. The last line of the poem is in present progressive, suggesting that the empty ritual is ongoing. The form has outlived the content. But the life that remains is a half-life; it is “a Virgin eternity” rather than something that is continually renewed.

If we can assume the speaker as poet, the poem’s double focus on poetic and religious practice fuses here. This fusing is not simply Devlin’s careful closing of the field of images to complete the poem in New Critic fashion, but an intensification of feeling. This is no detached account of the erosion of religion and poetry as in “Now;” it is a highly personal account with human consequences. If Devlin were to leave the speaker out of the final line the woman would remain the pitied pilgrim and the speaker above critique. Instead the speaker as poet is a fellow pilgrim, himself implicated in the tired practice of empty ritual. The poet continues to write even though he cannot find a revitalizing aesthetic just as the woman continues to cry out to a God who is no longer there. So although Devlin writes in what Davis describes as “precisely the coherent, closed structure Perloff identifies in the poetry of Eliot and others: an autotelic construct of ambivalent, but not indeterminate, meaning that is the hallmark of the New Critical ‘verbal icon’” (Davis 58); he nevertheless recognizes its limitations. Peggy O’Brien allows for greater nuance of effect in Devlin’s use of language, where, “depending on how you hold it up to the light, can display the corrugated, broken surface of modernism or the smooth unity of symbol” (O’Brien 110). Thus Devlin’s language is able to express both the reality of the brokenness of modern life and the longing for a return to wholeness, no matter how impossible.

*Intercessions* follows *First Poems* as an elaboration of the problems of tradition. Devlin focuses on cultural decay, interrogating culturally significant structures first as emblems of decline (as in “Liffey Bridge”) and then sites of potential, but ultimately impossible, rebirth. It begins with “Alembic,” an elegy for the state of a culture gone stagnant, in which “This stillblowing wind springs/No rain no rain enmeshing/Multiple infant feet of aspirant winds” (2-4). “Stillblowing” is too close to “stillborn” to ignore heavy allusions to impotence and infertility and the “Cloistral lashes shut on folded cheeks” (6) reinforces a sense of barrenness borne of isolation. There’s still a bit of hope here, though: the speaker consoles himself that

The wind may unwax my summer, let the  
Accountant suspend work, wipe his misty glasses  
The wind pads almost noiseless like a cat  
Do not reject its suave caresses, Heart. (10-12)

That hope is soon buried in the poems that follow.

“Death and Her Beasts, Ignoble Beasts” introduces Death (ultimate, not metaphorical) to remind us that cultural death is no small thing. Against the soothing entreaties of friends to accept death (“Now your currupt[sic] sweet pleading through my friends/Smooths me like cambric on an infant’s flesh” [12-13]), and crippled by his own faltering resolve (“Unexplained tears suddenly blur my courage/And desert movements in the breast shaking/The forts I built so well already ravaged” [16-18]) the speaker renews his call to arms against it: “Yet, Sacker of crumbling towns, I will not agree/To the proposal of peace you made to my friends” (26-7). Is this Devlin’s call to arms against the death-knell of a culture, both Irish and continental? The last stanza seems to confirm his commitment.

Attack me in the dark, I’ll extreme fear

With the first of all landscapes given its eyes  
In the frantic group of naked man and horse;  
With the cheering of shredded men in losts [sic] forts  
And to go on with, the length of today and tomorrow,  
The evidence that lifting needles make the cloth. (28-33)

Devlin holds out some hope for the possibilities of poetry in his reference to knitting, though one wonders, especially as vultures circle above the poem (“They would feed sick life on the smashed mouths of the weak/Whose nostrils death has plugged with stale love-smells” [4-5]) if what the poet fashions will ultimately be a winding-cloth.

“Windtacker Windjamming” shifts the tone significantly, as if the speaker has reached the limits of despair in “Death.” The playfulness of the poem is startling after “Death;” by way of explanation Devlin begins,

I really don’t know what to think  
As the wise cat said to the kind  
When big with proverb  
But if it’s proper  
To get my bearings  
At least I’m aware of  
My sky changing its costume all day long. (1-7)

The last two lines foreshadow the intentionally shifting strategies of “Communication from the Eiffel Tower” later in the collection, including the poet’s awareness of the shifting boundaries of his art; in that poem Devlin will “change [his] costume,” to the point of ventriloquism, as a way of foregrounding his own anxieties over the fragile connection between art and life.

“Liffey Bridge” articulates the poet’s frustration over available modes of expression in ways that recall *First Poems* and sheds the lighter tone of “Windtacker.” This time his dissatisfaction with the Irish aesthetic inheritance centers on Dublin’s symbolic bridge. As in “Lough Derg” and to some extent “O Paltry Melancholy,” “Liffey Bridge” bemoans the rote life of parade-goers who have lost the original passion of their cultural exercises. The lines are short, as if the walkers must take breaths to rest between them: “Trailing behind/Tired poses/ How they all/Fulfill their station!” (5-8). The speaker’s amazement at their complacency is the only energy apparent in the stanza, which is so sapped that exclamation marks barely raise the pitch to a murmur. Like “Lough Derg,” “station” conflates religious and cultural stagnation, but this time the speaker has divorced himself from the parade. There is no nostalgia for ritual here, particularly as it has been emptied of all passion and energy. The executioner of “Now” returns as the bridge, which plays “assassin” (11), killing the hopes and desires of youth:

In limp doorways  
They try out their heaven  
They grind at love  
With gritted kisses  
Then eyes re-opened  
Behold slack flesh  
Such an assassin  
Such a world! (33-40)

Devlin’s bridge in some ways stands for form—specifically as an architectural witness to and repository for culture—and as in “Communication” (“content is hollow and vile it will remain/to suffer branding from tools, the senses’ servants” [“Communication” 246-7]), the content



available to fill it is emptiness itself. Devlin's poem articulates the dilemma of the Irish poetry in mid-century: how does one write between cultural erosion ("water") and migration ("flight")? How can a substantive poetry emerge from forms that no longer take the shapes of their worlds? Devlin's poetry is not keen to create new bridges but to show up the old ones for what they can no longer do; this is not a Big House aesthetic, mourning, however ambivalently, a lost order (unless, of course, that order is classical). Erosion is inevitable, and what is lost is not pined for. It is simply, not sadly, no longer of service, and there is nothing available to take its place.

"Communication from the Eiffel Tower" is in many ways about limitation, whether the "lamplight drips reluctantly over the windowsill" or the waves are "stifled at each birth, sucked back/Into the marine mass" (Devlin 98-9). The first stanza sets a tone of instability and uncertainty.

In the court darkness breathes heavily like a woman in labour

Starlight hammers at wary roofs always at bay

Always at bay the houses carry their boatloads of sleepers

Through celestial channels of darkness upset with nightmare

Shying at the shallows of that feeble light, moon, that ally of day. (1-5)

Night is not rest but a preparation for day, active, disturbing, and unsafe. So far, though, the scene is coherent and recognizable; instability, as in "darkness upset with nightmare" has a shape. In the next stanza, and indeed the rest of the poem, however, Devlin's scenes quickly become less and less mappable until, while the semantic structure remains largely intact, the symbolic center disintegrates, only to resurface later in the poem as the semantic structure disintegrates. In this way Devlin's use of indeterminacy—in which symbol can no longer reliably point in one specific direction—undermines the stability of the connections between art and life;

and in doing so, Devlin's poem is free to interrogate the limits of representation in ways that implicate cultural discourses which have an impact on real lives.

"Communication" is both playful and deadly serious; although its 'geography' is symbolic, though not always in a symbolist way, its consequences are real. And while its speaking subject is consistent in identity—he is male, European, prophetic—it is unstable in voice (where dreams provide space for alternatives). The poem is just as uneasy with forms of modernism, in some ways acting as a sampler for various modernist schools and techniques. Alex Davis has detailed these explorations, identifying Futurist, Surrealist, and early modernist impulses which Devlin then summarily undoes. For example, his representation of the Eiffel Tower "recall[ing] the immoderate, excessive poetic generated by the Futurists' seduction at the hands of technological modernity" becomes a Marxist critique of the tower as alienation from the labor that produced it: "The 'embittered' boy and girl reinforce the poem's oblique critique of a society dominated by exchange relations" (Davis 31-2). Devlin's poetry turns on itself just as the woman's misspeaking of Gobineau's name; the ideas in the poem are constantly 'transmuted' (Davis 33).

But the poem does more than sample poetic styles. It engages them (sometimes exultantly, sometimes with repulsion) to get at the problems of art and ideology by way of a contemplation of the nature of representation. "Communication" tackles the physically largest, most culturally intense locus of meaning of the 1930s, launching Devlin's poetry from Ireland, land of small round towers, to Continental Europe, where the Eiffel Tower rose over (and into) a cultural crisis. The poem is not an abandonment of the home country but rather an opening out. Taken with the entire collection, which weaves in and out of Ireland, "Communication" articulates an anxiety that echoes the Irish poet's problem—that of the inadequacy of available

structures of representation and meaning to violently changing cultural landscapes—and enlarges it to encompass the whole of the Western world. Aside from the title which locates the tower in France (and after the title the “Eiffel” drops out completely—the tower becomes an emblem for all of Europe, not just France), there are few other references specific to countries within Europe. “America” and “Buenos Aires” are mentioned as points in a dreamscape but do not situate the poem in a specific location. In doing so the poem distills the project into a series of related questions: What is the nature of ideology? How should art respond to it? What do art and ideology have in common? How does representation work, and where does it fail? In asking these questions Devlin’s poem becomes a critique of a cultural moment that indicts both ideology and representation as potentially destructive and pathological.

The poem roughly follows a series of transitions from day night and back to day, sleeping into waking into dreaming into waking again. Devlin inverts traditional constellations of light and darkness by assigning self-delusion to the day (“The world’s blatant glare merely hoods us/From dissolute mortal violence” [226-27]) and clarity to night (“Night O Clearer than the day/Because the objects of love are visible” [292-93]). Meanwhile states of wakefulness and dreaming allow the speaker to take on voices he would not have otherwise been afforded by the difficult to locate but consistent writerly voice. The lack of a physical geography, aside from the entirely vertical tower, allows Devlin to create an image-scape in which mind-states stand in for locales and changes in light constitute movement and transition. In some ways this kind of fabricated world is appropriate to the exploration of intellectual fabrication in the form of fascist ideologies; the poem’s series of maskings and revelations turn a mirror onto the nature of ideology while seriously questioning its own ability to tell the truth.

The poem specifically addresses fascism but its analysis could be applied to any form of ideology, including aesthetic ones. He introduces fascism with reference to Gobineau, the nineteenth-century author of “An Essay on the Inequality of the Races” to whom twentieth-century fascists, including Hitler, looked for scholarly legitimation. Immediately, though, Devlin foregrounds his concerns with appropriation and representation through the woman’s mispronunciation of Gobineau to the great consternation of the speaker (“GOBINEAU it is why will you keep on saying GOBITHAU?/How can you help, you cannot get the words right” [75-76]).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless the speaker attempts to recreate Gobineau’s ideas through a spokeswoman who in turn tries to render the oppression of large swaths of society both eloquent and inevitable, and asks the speaker to merely look away if it makes him uncomfortable:

“Whereas” she states “fortune and misfortune construct existence  
For the fairer sifting of history  
To the more fortune of our children’s children  
And whereas it is expedient to have heaven, of dark locality doubtless,  
Made of distracted eyes the beacon while the hands bought off  
In major labour nurse the treasury  
Of the minority most virtuous  
So, for that this misery of the many is necessary  
Avert your countenance while my tribal groups of combat  
In a terse putsch strike elsewhere for your sake  
Besides our misery’s mental, take this girl” (32-42, quotation marks in original)

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<sup>10</sup> Both Alex Davis and J.C.C. Mays see the addition of the German suffix—which renders the word meaningless—as a reflection of German misappropriation of French ideas.

The woman's distillation of Gobineau's arguments emphasizes the extent to which they (or their interpretation) require that one "avert[s]" one's "countenance" and that heaven be "made of distracted eyes" so that the horrific consequences of "nurs[ing] the treasury/Of the minority most virtuous" can exist out of sight ("elsewhere"). The fascist imagination, in order to maintain its sense of all-encompassing order, must ask its adherents to ignore marginal disruptions—mainly here the presence of conscience—and separate itself from the realm of the body ("this misery of the many is necessary;" "Besides our misery's mental"). In doing so it both affirms its absolute power and admits to the necessity of will for its maintenance. The speaker rejects the argument and the offer of bodily consolation in the form of a girl-prize ("Well no, I must say," asserting his own will), and in the next stanza accuses the fascist follower of a lack of will herself:

"GOBINEAU has enpimped you, you have all gone dame/With feathers and cooing curves as if I had made you/Keep off poisoner of seed pretty flint-flanks/Pivot of a fan of showgirls with a slow lilt to their hips" (45-48). These lines are doubly insulting to a hyper-masculine, heavily patriarchal ideology. They denigrate even the high sense of temptation introduced early in the third stanza where Gobineau is the Satan to the speaker's Christ, though able to offer nothing like glittering kingdoms: "Once from a balcony set at eagle height/He showed me air that first poured brown like glue/And then clotted rigid with human nerves" (23-25).

In the middle of stanza four, after he has mocked and feminized fascism, the speaker pauses here to reflect on whether or not he should be delving into the realm of politics in the first place. In the penultimate line of the stanza he falters: "Will I come? But it is absurd, a bookworm, now, Will I mind my business?" (49) What business does the poet have of engaging the politics of the day? If he does, is he merely answering the siren call of the "showgirls" he derides in the stanza's earlier lines? But in the last line we see that the work pursues *him*: "Yes I

know let me alone your only words are insane” (50). He doubts his involvement in two directions; it may not be right to engage politics in the first place, and in any case he would rather be left alone.

The wish to retreat continues into the next stanza, which begins with the evasive “Let’s have breakfast now to pretend it’s morning,” but it quickly becomes apparent that what he desires is not possible: “No, the bell corrodes the silence cover my mouth.” Still, if he cannot make it morning he will try to make the night tolerable through the rest of the stanza. “Gentle when I am sleeping breathe girl O summer twilight/The fireflies of your gentle thoughts through my gnarled thorn tree nerves/Smile through my eyelids soothing as a shaded lamp.” In the stanza that follows he abruptly corrects himself, despite his refusals in stanza three, for giving into the temptation of retreat. Invoking the language of biblical rebuke he reminds himself of the seriousness of the cultural moment, then moves into a damning critique of modern Europe’s situation:

Let her not take thee with her eyelids  
Let her not bemuse thee with her tongue  
All the legends of love are unavailing  
All the hawthorn of breasts is comfortless  
All the periods of eloquence cannot smother  
The monosyllables of these unwilling unbelievers  
Scuffling for a foothold  
Prayer choked in their throats  
By puffs of iron dust of their subsiding works  
The prefects of society stare with taut eyes

Try not to hear the exact drumtaps at their years  
The imagined representation of distant barbaric invasions  
A snap as of jaws breaking, the windbiffed empire buildings  
Crack snap apart, become felled pines  
Hesitating into their preying shadows  
All the bearers of further tidings dry up such as docked ships  
All the squadrons of bladed flight  
Humiliated, are black beetles so crass in bulk they  
Cannot be said to creep but lurch. (56-74)

I quote at length because this stanza offers in the clearest terms the parameters of his diagnosis in ways that transcend a narrow critique of fascism and extend to encompass a cultural situation of which fascism is merely a symptom. Here Devlin levels a modernist critique: a lack of belief (“unwilling unbelievers/Scuffling for a foothold/Prayer choked in their throats”), the dangers of industry and its broken promise of eternal life (“Prayer choked in their throats/By puffs of iron dust of their subsiding works”), the excesses of empire coming home to roost (“A snap as of jaws breaking, the windbiffed empire buildings/ Crack snap apart, become felled pines”), and the failure of military might (“All the squadrons of bladed flight/ Humiliated, are black beetles so crass in bulk they/ Cannot be said to creep but lurch”) are horrors that no one, not even a “bookworm” can or should ignore.

From here Devlin turns to fascism itself, which in the speaker’s mind has been posited by its proponents—described as the old guard, who despite “banking on the privileges of age” (83) should be “court martial[ed]” (89)—as the solution to the problems of modern society. The tone becomes prophetic, channeling Marxism, as he warns of blowback from the margins: “The

lidded anger of the oppressed/ Stutters through chinks; and it may detonate!” (95-6) Pre-formalized, primitive energies threaten the institutions fascism relies upon for control; and Devlin’s wedding of non-political fascisms, which function to sterilize these energies, and Fascism emphasizes the extent to which Devlin (and others) worried about the real political and humanitarian consequences of insisting upon empty formalism.

Moving to a ventriloquization of Futurism, the tower now appears for the first time as the “humming” (104) center around which the entire poem whips, “mounted on guard among the clouds” (105). It is at this point that Devlin turns to problems of representation and weaves them in with problems of political excess and the dangerous claims—for both art and social practice—of wholeness and self-evidence. The tone becomes bold and triumphant, celebrating the tower which is “bound in the steel necessity/ Of its own girders Time to one end willing/ Time which is patience of man and hope of birth” (107-9). The speaker weds the tower’s capacity to centralize meaning with fascism’s total consumption. “Unhappiness is easily shed/ When any act can be fitted, even at command/ As of simple recruits from their knees rising” (110-12). Devlin speaks throughout his poetry of the need for passion and belief, but finds it here misappropriated, as Yeats describes in “The Second Coming,” where “the best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity” (Yeats lines 7-8). Devlin’s speaker jumps back and forth between embracing the promises of Futurism, which parallel those of fascism, and offering stinging critiques. Having fallen prey once again to the wooings of Gobineau, he asks, “Who then has drugged me?” (125) and attests to the strictures of fascism: “GOBINEAU you would close me/ In a circle of no thoroughfare” (130-1). This is the same speaker whose hesitations at the beginning of the poem indicated the desire for the freedom to be left out of such matters; and having realized he could not be left out, is trapped.



Devlin returns to a Marxist critique and the modernist contention between individual and mass politics. Other than the mention of “hordes” of oppressed people, the poem has centered around the speaker’s individual experience of fascist ideology; now in the middle of the poem he realizes the limits of his isolation. “Their suffering looks faked and is not so,/ And mine to them, but wrong” (137-8). The hordes have become so dehumanized that the speaker cannot readily (without intellectualizing) read their pain, and they cannot read his; and this unintelligibility prevents the speaker from being part of the community. Frustrated by the inscrutability of those who are suffering, and feeling that the common experience of suffering should make them equal (“Our opposite provinces in thought are leveled” [141]), all he wants to do is write about the oppressed—but all he can write about is Gobineau. Again at the end of the stanza he is re-taken by the Futurist impulse, which seems like a necessity in the face of such division. “And living in the worse of each, we must invest/ A third power a mechanic ambassador of our best and most/ A leap in the dark from this instant to the next . . . Imperious actual, I have no means/ Of gathering you away from you/ Unless I fall back on my voracious tower” (145-7; 149-151). By identifying the impulse toward Futurism (with the tower as its ultimate symbol) as the same as that which leads a society to accept fascism—the need to create order, meaning, and a sense of happiness, no matter how false—Devlin’s critique becomes all-encompassing, and like the best of his other poems (and those of MacGreevy’s as well), the poem is as much about the limits and dangers of representation as it is about a culture headed to a hell much worse than the one it is trying to escape.

The speaker flirts with symbolism briefly (“I might fly to the Sassanian empire and mould in the margin/ Like an old train among the gay weeds of sidetrack” [154-5]), recalling “Now,” earlier in the collection, in which symbolism signals the end of art itself; Devlin’s

reference to his earlier treatment of symbolism brings the experimentation with representation to an end in this poem. Because art, having come to its end in symbolism (in Devlin's formulation), can no longer act as a viable conduit of expression and meaning, the poem has nowhere else to go but to the tyranny of the symbol, emptied of reference. It is at this moment that the speaker falls headlong into tower-worship. Significantly, it is now capitalized and the submission is total: "Tower O my subduer Tower my tyrant" (159). Both masculinized and feminized (as tyrant and subduer but also having girders that are "lovable they are like nubile girls bending" [161]) the Tower is fused and whole-seeming and the speaker is satisfied. "Smiles risen goldfish through currents of dreaming, tower girded and pliant" (163). Having been seduced once again, the speaker abandons his post as the lonely writer to join the masses from whom he has previously been alienated. "I am by my acceptance reassured/ Saying I come! As if a voice asked Will you come? . . . Moving with the Amazon's muted thunder and the crushed/ humming of its song its birds/ To find its place in the sea" (166-67; 169-70).

Michael Tratner writes against critical tendencies to regard modernism as the assertion of an individual identity self-alienated by non-realist styles against mass identity. Instead he sees modernism as moving *toward* collectivism in a way that reflects rather than resists modern political movements, marking its departure from nineteenth-century individualism through experimentation. "Many of the experimental features of modernist texts may be understood as efforts by authors to disrupt their own conscious personalities (and the conscious personalities of their readers) in order to reveal and perhaps alter the socially structured mentality hidden inside each person's unconscious" (Tratner 3). The alternation in "Communication" between states of waking and sleeping suggests an attempt to unravel the unconscious of the individual poet negotiating isolation and collective will. Just as he joins the masses in stanza sixteen, the speaker

admits to the inevitability of the capitulation's origins: "And now I know my mind I'll sleep it off/ I slip on the greased keel of sleep into the cove/ Whose water cuffs my temples with plectrum taps" (171-73). Devlin returns to the maritime imagery of the first stanza, in which "houses carry their boatloads of sleepers," align social collectivity with the unconscious state of sleep and the wiping out of individual will with water. But the task of "Communication" is not to "engage with that invisible stream [the social medium], to reveal and alter it . . . to speak the language of the mass unconscious" thereby "breaking free of the Western metaphysics of individuals and distinct objects" (Tratner 9). Instead the poem swings between expressions of individual isolation and collectivism, finding both unsatisfactory positions to occupy in the face of real political circumstances. In the face of fascism and other all-consuming ideologies, individualism is both irresponsible and impossible, but collectivism is deadly.

When the speaker wakes to find himself "pushing streams of water" (174) rather than getting caught up in them, he returns again to the sort of individualism that requires a reassertion and retaking of the poem's geography. The world has the definable size of a table "such as one teaches at, breaks bread, drinks wine" (176), and unlike a nebulous sea has a mappable, even curtained, surface. "The four horizons are hung with a filmy curtain" (177). The speaker is no longer a passive participant but a kind of god. "My hands that sweep/ The lingering matchflares of the talked-out day/ Are looked upon as celebrating bonfires" (183-5). The central political figure is no longer Gobineau but Babeuf, a father of socialism and equality who the speaker channels. Subjectivity is now, in a way that splits the difference between a lonely individualism and a dangerous mass identity, an interplay of identities and their reflections. The speaker claims—or rather declaims, as he takes on the role of an orating leader—"that I BABEUF/ BABEUF and I mixed like the play of mirrors/ Make *table rase* ready for primary needs" (188-

90). This reorganization of the poem's geography, from one in which the speaker stands engulfed in the world of symbols and ideologies larger than himself to one where the world spreads out at the his feet, allows the poem to explore the consequences of spatial configurations of identity and social organization. In the Gobineau sections of the poem, one central figure draws all life and energy to himself, and the people are left hungry and oppressed. Babeuf, on the other hand, represents an opening out and a mutual receptivity.

    Their mouth's tense bows relieve them, releasing fingers

    Their eyes bulge like gates opening

    Of fortresses at morning full of prisoners

    Insisting on promised deliverance. (191-94)

But abundance in this case requires the beneficence of a paternal figure. The reader's relief at the hope of food for the hungry is dashed in the same stanza by the parallel operations of the worlds according to Gobineau and Babeuf; the consequence of both of these socio-spatial arrangements is the total dependence of the many on the few.

The tower returns in the last third of the poem as a "strong swimmer" that "breasts the clouds" (195). Again the tower both embodies and advocates for self-evidence as a balm for the "skies anxious with rain and dreary furrows" (197). This time it answers the poem's unease with the masses' dependence on the few by asserting an essentialism it now applies to the individual.

    And before men become dignified

    Being not such as light but passes through

    By accident like prisms that depend

    On a stray hand

    But rather their idea operative in them like health

Interluminant with their perfect each. (198-203)

Again what is offered as an alternative, no matter how beautifully phrased and ethically attractive, is merely another version of the tendency toward essentialism (here having rejected chance as a legitimate force) as a response to constantly changing modern realities. By the end of the stanza hyper-individualism has merged with the fascist will, recalling Gobineau's wild-armed spokeswoman of the third stanza: "Therefore let us bare our hold, let us/ Offer our passion to the tentacular sadist/ There is just one chance we dare not miss our chance" (207-9). The urgency of the line drives the stanza's alternating tones of high-flying hopefulness and desperation and reflects what Devlin might regard as a dangerous cultural urgency.

Devlin lambastes the tendency to regard this urgency as benign in the next stanza in which a town

where the passages of tenderness

Are so impulsive and so expert

That the charmed inhabitants moving

With the light-sprung southwest wind's annunciation

Provoke milk-drowsy earth to flower everywhere (211-15)

is merely another socio-spatial construct that thinly masks the effects of an all-encompassing ideology. Even as the poem's language invites the reader to revel in the town's abundance, beauty, and kindness, the speaker asks "Will untraced echoes not bewilder sounds?/ And light twitch like the wing of a drying bird?" (216-17) The poem, which until now has affirmed the clear-headedness of the day against the delusions of the dream world, now cautions against the blindingness of light.

For that its inhabitants fine-limbed and content

Strut in a day blind from its own glare . . . the security of day is precipitous

The world's blatant glare merely hoods us

From dissolute mortal violence. (221-22; 225-27)

This town is more than just another example of a dangerous essentialism; it begins to acknowledge that there is no airless ideology, and that in turn makes the claims of fascism—and the other forms of essentialism explored in the poem—not just ethically problematic but practically impossible.

It is at this moment, when Devlin has made clear the weaknesses of essentialist ideologies, that he returns to problems of representation. Devlin's poetics of indeterminacy dissolve the previously well-defined relationship between art and life (a move Rimbaud and Pound, according to Perloff, also make), as a way of reasserting the dangers of determinancy itself. Because *Intercessions* appears in the midst of what was to many the frightening real-world consequences (in Russia and Germany particularly) of determinist philosophies, the poem has an urgency and immediacy that demands the importance of attending to modes of representation. The tower re-emerges not as a strong central repository of meaning and cultural strength but as nothing more than ornamentation. Devlin extends the analysis of the previous stanza when he refers to the tower as "that snowy steel town" (230) and asks "What can it offer/ More than the pretty tinkling of snowy steel?" (234-5) The tower that has asserted itself, and been asserted, as the paragon of strength and self-evidence is, like the real Eiffel Tower, easily dismantled. "Anything will dislocate the riveting" (236), he writes; its function as a cultural symbol is physical and structural. It gives shape and structure to life, especially as a refuge or resource or when other means of understanding have been found wanting ("Summoned when the trestle-blether texts of poverty are irrelevant" [233]). But the tower is not able to handle every

contingency; not embitterment (“A boy embittered when summer rain smells fresh on hot limbs” [237]), desire (“Desire trapped in a girl’s wet hair breathes” [238]), the anonymity of modern life (“Or a bored mechanic polishing and he mutters/ Caught by sight of his face in one of a million rollers” [239-40]), disenchantment (“Or the bewilderment of the strong and fair covertly noting/ A beloved forehead suave as styles of maize becoming/ Restless and stained” [241-3]) or dislocation and pained longing (“Or no news yet from emigrant sons” [244]). In other words, nothing that the era in which Devlin writes the poem has to offer the poet can be served by an aesthetic that relies upon trusted, immoveable symbols. The time for transparent and recognizable representation is gone; and for those who would accuse the poet of merely stressing content over form he turns the usual relationship inside out: “Content is hollow and vile it will remain/ To suffer branding from tools, the senses’ servants” (246). Branding is the process of being named, labeled, and given a form. But the form is not adequate and cannot hold everything; merely, it can be beautiful (“What can it offer/ More than the pretty tinkling of snowy steel?” [234]). The uselessness of art is that it can do nothing about poverty, desire, and despair. This is where Devlin’s poem becomes European in a way that is applicable to Ireland (as emigrant sons are mentioned), whose round towers have become a symbol for the strength, endurance, and continuity of Irish culture: he asks, what are the limitations of our towers?

Meanwhile, life goes on (“the unnoticed jungle rain of duration patters” [249]), and the tendency to reach for a tower remains (“Anything we know too well or not,/ The worm of anguish in the innocent heart,/ Anything will startle again that voice/ Shrouded in the stone dream of doom” [251-4]). “Jungle rain” works against the idea in stanza 18 that self-determination rather than chance is what defines us; here it is the wildness of the persistence of the passage of time that escapes our sorry attempts at representation, and is perhaps ironically the

only thing that is true and reliable. Even so, the poet/speaker understands that our compulsion to erect towers is inescapably bound up in language. This time, when the speaker allows himself to become seduced by the tower again in stanza 22, it is with acknowledgment of the tower's limitations as a symbol. "Tower that support my view erect/ Firm beneath my picture of you, stand" (257-58). The almost tender stanza recasts the role as both crucial *and* limited.

Not long ago we are fragile, in need of precept.

Tower, graph of the mind and hand

How the hand has embraced the mind in you!

Graceful result of faith right by a hair's breadth

Mounting resolution of awry steel

Be my exemplar of the hero

Who grasps his strength with bolts, obeys and only seems to sway

When the bad weathers drive. (264-71)

The difference between the tower-worship of previous stanzas and this one is that it is *hero*-worship, not god-worship. Heroes are not only flawed, but invented, existing not for and by themselves but inside of language. The tower is nothing more than what we ourselves are; and its importance lies not in its perfection but in its (imperfect) solidity and materiality. It can provide what an all-encompassing ideology promises and cannot deliver: the wedding of form and content in the figure of the hero, whose "mind and hand" are one with its "graph" of the same.

As the poem begins to draw to a close, the "jungle rain" returns in the fecundity and relentlessness of time, and as the sun has set in the previous stanza, we are in darkness once again. "I am crowded round by the speechless amoeba-night/ Massed silkworms nuclear of centuries/ Days after and days after to-morrow" (272-74). In contrast to the deceitfulness of



daytime in stanza 19, the night is “clearer than the day/ Because the objects of love are visible” (292-93). If the night in some ways stands in for the unconscious, in and out of which the speaker drifts through the course of the poem, here the poet inverts the usual association between the ‘reality’ of consciousness and the fantasy-like realm of the unconscious. Here the unconscious is to be trusted because desire is not rationalized or sublimated but is apparent. And lest he be accused of advocating isolationism, *this* unconscious is collective. Though the stanza begins with the singular first-person pronoun, he continues in the plural: “Wombed in your cathedrals let *us* watch” (279); “Teach *us* the acid experience of the dead” (285); Drug the tigers of desire that prowl at large/ That in tranquility gradual *our* value flower” (288-9; emphasis added). The insistence on a communal unconscious follows the orientation of the poem towards collective cultural tendencies. This is not an examination of individual responses to modernity but cultural ones (which include extreme individualism).

Despite some settling on the nature of representation—that the best of art is living, dynamic, flawed, and always in language—and the affirmation of the wellspring of the unconscious (reclaimed from its association with the individual and extended to the collective), in keeping with much of Devlin’s poetry, “Communication from the Eiffel Tower” ends pessimistically. “The people look for new commands, uncertain” (294); they do not seek answers or understanding, but desiring being told what to do, wish for the tyrannies against which the poem cautions. And so the poet is “made to speak” (297) with an unpleasant prophesy:

“The losses that I count will be unpleasant  
On the hither side of light for a long time  
Your looks will not leap  
The excited escarpments of colour

Nor the broken geometry of shape

You will lend no more to laughter

There will be no grief each for his own grief

But only narrow beds and milk and bread” (298-305, quotation marks in original)

In the coming disaster even the ability to process loss—grief—will be denied, and only the barest of human necessities will be available. Is this the speaker’s prophecy of the end of art (with no “excited escarpments of colour/ nor the broken geometry of shape”)? Is the implication that the cultural tendency toward tyranny, essentialism, and all-consuming ideology will be the death of art? Certainly other of Devlin’s poetry (particularly “Now”) makes this interpretation enticing. But taken in its entirety, the poem stands primarily as an impassioned engagement with dire cultural and political issues that the poet would like to, but cannot, ignore; what makes “Communication from the Eiffel Tower” compelling is not just its timeliness but its indictment of the state of art along with the expected judgments of fascism and ideology. Its brilliance is the continuity it sees between a culture and its forms of representation, and the complexity of the interplay between the two.

## WAR POET AND MODERNIST: THOMAS MACGREEVY

Thomas MacGreevy is better known as a friend to Eliot and Joyce than as a serious modernist poet. In terms of the volume of his work, he is indeed a minor poet. His stylistically and thematically diverse *Poems* experiments with a diversity of modernist strategies and in doing so multiplies notions of modernism. An examination of *Poems* attests to the importance of this poetry to the study of Irish poetry and European modernisms in mid-century. A study of MacGreevy's poetry also challenges a commonly held notion that Ireland in mid-century was culturally isolated. MacGreevy's *Collected Poems* is thematically concerned with the Irishman's connection to the rest of Europe (chiefly in the figure of the World War I soldier) and stylistically linked, though with its own valence, to the modernisms of mid-century continental Europe and England. I will be looking at the *Collected Poems* for the benefit of a few errant poems that were not included in his only complete volume.

MacGreevy's poetry simultaneously rejects the notion that poetry can "do" anything, or indeed, say anything, and posits that very rejection as a legitimate, and even ethical response to the world of his time. Significantly, his rejection of a hyper-nationalist aesthetic does not signal either the end of poetry *or* of nationalism. When the speaker of "The Six Who Were Hanged" asks "Why am I here?" (19) the question is the point and the speaker makes no attempt at an

answer. Instead, as the poem closes, the speaker chooses ritual over understanding when in response to the last question of the poem (“what, these seven hundred years,/ Has Ireland had to do/ With the morning star?”) he joins the mourners in a Hail Mary. MacGreevy’s recourse to religious ritual recalls Eliot. In his essay on MacGreevy, Beckett describes poetry as “prayer” and praises MacGreevy for seeing it as such. This “prayer” is “no more (no less) than an act of recognition. And, even a wink” (Beckett 68). The wink is the joke MacGreevy makes and Beckett gets, which is that of a poet writing for poetry’s sake, to paraphrase the invective of the time. How then can Terence Brown claim that “in Ireland impulses which elsewhere can find expression in reactionary modernist stances and polemics were channeled into nationalist feeling and the exposition of its sustaining ideology” (Brown 41)? Would this claim not require that MacGreevy be a “man of action” and not a man whose poetry is an “act of recognition?”

And yet MacGreevy *was* a nationalist and a commitment to Ireland is evident in his poetry. Modernism in Ireland did not mean the wholesale rejection of nationalism; MacGreevy is one of those poets who managed to engage with nationalism without slipping into nationalist ideology, as so many coattail Revivalists did. Mays argues that MacGreevy

believed what is incontrovertible, that Irish experience is unique, but he was tolerant enough to realize that other nations could claim the same prerogative on their own behalf and his sense of the Irish mind was not something to be imposed on the Irish people. His idea of national identity took other national identities into account and welcomed their fructifying influence. He differs from many other modernist writers in that he thought in nationalist terms; he differs from many Irish nationalist in the selflessness and range of his extra-national sympathies. (Mays 111)

MacGreevy was able, in other words, to write with a mind to the cultural plurality that characterizes mid-century European modernism while recognizing the coherence and importance of distinct national identities. Unlike Eliot, who found the ideal of nationalism in past and non-European cultural idioms and eschewed its current expressions, MacGreevy saw no need to draw on tribal or mythic models to confront the thorny issues of national identity that Ireland struggled with in the years immediately following independence. In a turn away from the Revivalist mode of inscribing Irish identity as essentially provincial, MacGreevy “wrote against the background of the idea of a nation, not a province, and in relation to other national cultures” (Mays 123).

MacGreevy shows his distaste for provincializing images in “The Six Who Were Hanged,” in which he is preoccupied with the naked form by which the hanging takes place. The poem is concerned with how many are to be hanged and at what time; the characters are reduced to their functions within the transaction. Here again MacGreevy turns them into colors: green, white, and gold, the colors of Ireland, but stripped of cultural and political meaning. These are colors borrowed from the palette of the provincial Irish poet, but emptied of their representational significance. It is as if Yeats’s curse from the “My Descendents” section of “Meditations in Time of Civil War” has come to pass:

May this laborious stair and this stark tower

Become a roofless ruin that the owl

May build in the cracked masonry and cry

Her desolation to the desolate sky. (Yeats 94, lines 13-16 )

All the careful work that Yeats has done to perfect the symbols of an Irish culture that will sustain it through the difficulties of civil war is being undone in the work of Thomas MacGreevy, but it is not, as Yeats’ poem would have it, because of “too much business with the

passing hour,/ Through too much play, or marriage with a fool” (Yeats 11-12) but because the poets are no longer adequate to the task. The distinction between a national identity based on provincialism and that which relates to other national cultures is crucial here: the storehouse of aesthetic material Yeats intends to pass on is rooted in local lore that has been nationalized, as opposed to that which, being fully national, can be in conversation with other national cultural idioms. What makes an aesthetic structure fully national in this way? And why is a cultural identity based on provincialism so poorly suited to survive the upheavals of political change? The changing demands of the present mean that the storehouse of images, myths and stories must constantly be revitalized in order to engage with the present in any meaningful way. But the climate of mid-century Ireland did not allow for the kind of continual renewal a vibrant poetic tradition required. The focus of public personalities (notably, Eamon deValera in his radio addresses) on the old ideals, complete with worn-out symbols and images of a mythical Gaelic past made it difficult for anyone who wished to keep up with the demands of the present to write and work in Ireland. Difficult, surely, but not impossible; and for poets like MacGreevy, the challenge was not only to find a suitable language in which to engage with the present but to show up the old language for its inadequacies. If Terence Brown finds a lack of innovation in the poetry of the Thirties and Forties he is missing the extent to which poets were grappling with these very frustrations in interesting, and even innovative ways. MacGreevy’s use of the images of war and the nationally displaced soldier (as well as displaced artists, diplomats, and political figures) works to signal the frustration of a poet rejecting language that is no longer adequate and trying to create his own. What results is a poetry that is made of the poet’s colossal failure on both fronts, and in the process a truly modernist aesthetic is born. In the space between the dying promises of the Celtic Twilight and those of a hopeful Europe plunged into disillusionment and

despair MacGreevy writes as an Irish poet coming to grips with the place of the Irish poet, and Irish poetry as Irish, in the world. *This* is the kind of poetry that is (ironically, in its utter failure<sup>11</sup>) finally adequate to the task of engaging with the present. What else could speak to the confusions of a country emerging from civil war still split geographically, politically, and culturally? What could address a cultural identity crisis better than an aesthetic constantly in doubt of itself? While the likes of deValera preached the importance of maintaining the old figures and images of provincialism, Irish modernist poets like MacGreevy (along with Devlin and Beckett, as we shall see) engaged with the crises of the present with an aesthetic language that could actually address it. That their work was not recognized is unsurprising given the rhetorical power of the (significantly watered-down) inheritors of a Revivalist aesthetic. What was appropriate to the founding of a nation free from foreign rule was inappropriate to the aftermath, but no one who wielded political and cultural power was saying so. Those who were worked in unappreciated silence or gained acclaim elsewhere.

Elsewhere, of course, was Europe, and there the aesthetics of alienation, despair, and the failure of representation was critically acceptable. Perhaps more established nations could rest easily in their identities as such and could focus on the questions that matters like the dangers of technology, the changing role of the Church, and the devastation of war posed. Ireland dealt with these issues, too, and it so happened that addressing them through poetic modernism also became a way to address the unique (to Western Europe of the early twentieth century) situation of a country emerging from centuries of outside rule. But Irish modernist poets broke the rules: they

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<sup>11</sup> The ‘failure’ I refer to here is negative: MacGreevy does not come up with a new set of images to fill the void left by the inadequacies of the Revivalist ones. The irony is that this failure is *in itself* an aesthetic language that is up to the task of engaging with the present.

were supposed to talk explicitly about Irishness and do so through the aesthetic established by the Revival. And they were certainly not to dabble in European experimentation. Such audacity would earn them poor readership in their own country and consequently no domestic livelihood to speak of. It is a myth that all Irish poets hated Ireland and could not wait to leave—perhaps Joyce comes erroneously to stand for all Irish writers in this way. Devlin found lucrative work as a diplomat, which necessarily involved travel outside of Ireland. Despite their physical displacements they were all fully engaged in the transformation of the Irish aesthetic.

MacGreevy's war poems both exemplify and wrestle with Modernism while negotiating its relation to Ireland specifically and Europe generally. In *Poems*,<sup>12</sup> the figure of the soldier becomes the personification of alienation, emptiness, impotence, and displacement. Although the recurring figure is not specifically identified as Irish, it does bring to mind MacGreevy's own conflicted experience as a nationalist Irishman fighting as a British soldier in World War I. The majority of the characters that show up in *Poems*, whether or not they are soldiers, are separated from their countries of origin, often dying and being buried in foreign soil (as in "De Civitate Hominum," "Golder's Green," "Aodh Ruadh O'Domhnaill," and "Gloria de Carlos V"). In "Golder's Green," MacGreevy's reference to poet Heinrich Heine, a Jew who moved between cultures uneasily as Protestant convert, amplifies the sense of displacement evoked by the soldiers in the poem who are buried in foreign places. In fact, Jim Haughey argues that "all of MacGreevy's poems are essentially war poems" for this reason (Haughey 214).

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<sup>12</sup> I refer here to the *Poems* rather than the later *Collected Poems* to emphasize MacGreevy's, rather than the editor's, craft. The only change to the later version is the addition of five poems throughout the volume. When I make an observation, for instance as it relates to the order of the poems or the repetition of certain images, that could just as easily be made of the earlier version as the later, I will continue this practice.



Allyson Booth has written about the gulf in English life between civilian and combatant experiences of World War I; the soldier is in the alienated position of one whose wholly physical (or corpsed<sup>13</sup>) experience of war is not articulatable in the “abstract vocabulary of patriotism” that he found “ludicrous and infuriating” (Booth 22). For Booth, the inadequacy of the language of “home” prompted many soldiers to draft their own accounts of WWI which created alternate spaces that became a kind of new home: “veterans’ accounts of the war may be understood as effecting a reclamation of home” (Booth 22). While MacGreevy’s poetry is not an account of the war as such it can be read as an articulation of the gulf between language and experience that World War I amplified by the difference in experience between those at home and those sent to war. But the “home” that MacGreevy’s poetry creates is not recognizable to the tradition that precedes it; it is not translatable into the green fields and Celtic myths of a Revivalist aesthetic. It is at once alien to an accepted sense of “Irishness” and in its rejection of it, more resonant with the lived experience of Irishness in the interwar period. This timely sense of Irishness—one of post-independence ambivalence over national identity and the decline of traditional cultic structures (the loosening of the Church’s authority)—resonates with (but does not mirror) similar concerns in continental Europe. MacGreevy’s modernism rests in its ability to articulate what is shared between Irish and European experiences of alienation and the demands of poetry in light of social and cultural upheaval.

In “Golder’s Green” MacGreevy’s speaker addresses the foreign-buried Irish soldier: “In death you will not miss/ Our earth or the rain from our low gray skies” (lines 2-3). MacGreevy’s use of the inclusive pronoun “our” emphasizes the loss of a particular community every bit as

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<sup>13</sup>I refer here to common strategies in war poetry which make speakers out of dead bodies as a way to emphasize that corpses are more alienating to home discourses of patriotism than mere corporeality.

much as the personal alienation of a soldier who dies and is buried far from home; and the “low gray skies” makes this loss specifically Irish. This is chief among the modernist dilemmas in MacGreevy’s writing: the tension between nationalism and internationalism, not just as a political choice but the felt experience of a person struggling between competing centers. MacGreevy’s personal position was doubly complex, as a person who fought under the flag of his country’s occupier (in nationalist terms) in order to offer support for other small nations under similar conditions.

John Jordan makes the case all too simplistically when he says that “MacGreevy satisfied our subconscious yearning for the ideal of a thoroughly Europeanised Irishman” (Jordan 12). Jordan’s readings find too much harmony between MacGreevy’s Irishness and Europeanness. “Subconscious yearning” for a place in the world is closer to the point; the displaced man in MacGreevy’s poetry, however, is at times beyond desire. He is, in fact, emptied of it; ultimately the speakers of these poems will occupy and stay in the space between desire and attainment in an act of resignation, as the home space is no longer available to them. The soldiers in “Golder’s Green” are not even identified as men, but corpses, who “in death . . . will not miss” their country of origin. The dilemma is in this sense not a choice. MacGreevy’s world is one in which circumstance, not will, determines where a body falls and where it is laid to rest. He makes the point in “Homage to Louis IX:”

One o’clock!

And ‘tis suddenly wild.

The dry wind

Catches the dust

And, like a child,

Whirls it purposelessly  
High in the air;  
Twists the branches of trees  
Into harmless symbolisms;  
Blows the papers from the table by my window  
Round the room  
In a chaste bacchanale. (1-12)

The sense of alienation of the soldier in the poem who has left his country to die in another is the point, not the determination of whether or not one should be loyal to Ireland primarily or join the rest of Europe. Here the classic metaphor of the wind as fate becomes chance instead, as it whirls “purposelessly.” The symbolisms—anything that would attach meaning to the circumstance of his death—are “harmless,” which in a time of war has particularly poignancy for a man whose prime purpose is to do harm. Action is not effective, as the “chaste bacchanale” comes to nothing. The actions of the soldier in the second stanza are completely without consequence.

A young man  
Who, all to-day  
And all last night,  
And yesterday,  
Moved, waking, through heaven,  
Passing silver star  
After silver star,  
Clustered silver stars,  
And gold suns,

Is sleeping now

On dark earth again. (13-23)

MacGreevy's world is one in which ashes return to ashes (as in "Golder's Green," where the corpse goes "to some place like this/ To be turned into a little ashes" [lines 4-5]). The man's whole life—"all to-day/And all last night,/And yesterday"—of action, indicated by the motion of his steps, leads him to back to where he started. He dies as a young man whose impotence echoes the "chaste bacchanale" of the previous stanza; the repetition of "silver stars" indicates that he will not live to be immortalized. He will not last into his silver (or golden) years, and his efforts will not make him a celebrity of any stripe. He will simply return to the earth.

Appropriately, the poem ends with a pointed critique of one of Ireland's silver stars (or "golden suns"), W.B. Yeats. "W.B., turned man of action, said: '*MacGreevy, / It is very hard to like men of action.*' / In sleep do they meet Thee face to face?" (33-35). The poem is now a modernist response to Yeats' engagement of Irish politics in poetry. The actions of individuals amount to nothing, and neither does art. "Men of action" are soldiers *and* poets but no matter; their fate is the same. Yeats' eternally vexing dilemma over whether poetry belongs only to itself or has an obligation to participate in the political life of a culture is here put to rest: the poet, like the soldier, affects nothing. The collection begins in "Nocturne" with a declaration of this view of poetry. Then entire short poem reads,

I labour in a barren place

Alone, self-conscious, frightened, blundering;

Far away, stars wheeling in space,

About my feet earth voices whispering.

Again MacGreevy speaks simultaneously of the work of poetry and the life of a soldier. The epigraph, “*To Geoffrey England Taylor, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, R.F.A. ‘Died of Wounds’*” reads as if it were culled from a newspaper obituary. The soldier is an everyman and a no-man. The poem’s subject is doubled, as the “I” might also be read as the poet, whose ego and work is of no consequence (hence the “barren place”). Its position at the opening of *Poems* announces that the volume will thematically address death in war but also the futility of the act of creation. The choice is not a mere matter of convenience, though MacGreevy would certainly have found themes and images from his own life easy to incorporate. What better choice to work out the implications of the horrors and alienations of modern life than the figure of the soldier, dying for essentially nothing, cold and lonely on foreign soil? What set of images could have better served a poet who addresses the failures of representation than those that speak to the utter meaninglessness of the ideals that lead countries to war? The soldier becomes engulfed in the field of objects; coming in as an individual hero, he finds himself erased by the randomness and senselessness of war. He dies not because of something but *as* just another something (and for MacGreevy, always on foreign soil, completely disconnected from any native, or sensible, structures of meaning). The figure of the soldier works in two directions for MacGreevy. On the one hand it provides an aesthetic language for the general discourse of loss, alienation, failure, and impotence. But it also parallels the experience of a poet who sets out to represent and preserve the ideals of his culture and finds himself stranded on foreign soil without a home country, as it were (in terms of a set of images and ideas suitable to the present situation), and unrecognized as a true Irish poet.<sup>14</sup> As Haughey puts it, “MacGreevy is one of the first Irish

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<sup>14</sup>I don’t mean to offer a simplistic one-to-one correspondence with MacGreevy’s own life but to emphasize the extent to which the figure of the soldier as MacGreevy writes him provides a language in which to

poets to make use of distinct images and icons from the Great War to illustrate the ongoing tensions in an Irish state searching for self-definition yet uncomfortable with certain strands of its narrative past” (Haughey 222). The doubling of the subject in “Nocturne” sets up the relationship as it will be borne out in the rest of the collection.

MacGreevy’s painting-inspired techniques, which reflect his work as an art critic, serve to elaborate the subject’s predicament in ways that his Irish poetic tradition did not afford. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his best-known war poem, “De Civitate Hominum.” It begins

The morning sky glitters  
Winter blue.  
The earth is snow-white,  
With the gleam snow-white answers to sunlight,  
Save where shell-holes are new,  
Black spots in the whiteness— (1-6)

MacGreevy then labels the picture in its own stanza, “A Matisse ensemble” (7). This is not a simplistic landscape poem in which a death will be mourned. Just as the reader prepares for a tribute, the poem becomes impersonal, a representation emptied of sentiment. The “whitened tree stumps” (8) are crassly placed next to “white bones” (10). Again the soldier will not live on even in memory. “Those who live between wars may not know/ But we who die between peaces/ Whether we die or not” (16-18). The world is turned upside-down as “’Tis still life that lives/ Not quick life” (25-6). The poem demonstrates this principal by its strange preoccupation with the images of death over death itself. “There are the fleece-white flowers of death/ That unfold

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talk about the situation of being Irish (and a poet) in mid-century.

themselves prettily/ About an airman” (27-9). The airman will be shot down in the poem, but the speaker is more concerned about the aesthetics of the scene. The only spot of color (black and white as essentially colorless) in the poem comes at the moment of his death, but here again the color itself becomes the subject and not the airman. “And he streams down/ Into the white,/ A delicate flame,/ A stroke of orange in the morning’s dress” (40-3). The airman has been left behind for the image of his death; and if the reader expects that image to possess a dignity worthy of a soldier’s death, he is disappointed to find that it instead belongs to the world of fashion. Earlier in the poem two empty spaces, a lake and a crater near which many soldiers have died, are similarly reduced to being “like the silver shoes of a model” (13). The silver in the shoes brings to mind the silver stars of “Homage to Louis IX,” though here silver is cheap and stands not for longevity but for meaningless embellishment. The silver shoes of the model in “De Civitate Hominum” cheapen the stars in “Homage to Louis IX,” further mocking the man of action who expects something to come of his efforts.

This shift of focus from death to aesthetics is evidence of the influence of Mallarmé, who insists that “the artist must ‘describe not the object itself, but the effect it produces’” (Pilling 25), as opposed to poetry that would produce effects through objects themselves. In this case the effect is the “stroke of orange;” the poem cannot be said to be “about” an airman’s death, specifically, but only to be engaged in some way with it. It is more about the images that the airman’s death brings to mind. This reading is at odds with that of J.C.C. Mays, for whom the poem addresses the ultimate failure of art.

“De Civitate Hominum” is about the horror created by man and his inability to respond to it adequately—a failure which reflects his nature and is the condition of his relation to God . . . As a poem of reaction in MacGreevy’s sense,

registering the attempt to translate life into art, 'De Civitate' is finally awkward and inadequate. The experience it describes draws a conventional response from the sergeant and a too-pat counter-response from the speaker, the witty line-break giving away his callowness, and this is the point. It is as much about limitation as achievement about the state of humanity and the inability of art to transcend nature. (Mays 116)

What Mays does not take into account is that the poem does not communicate any sort of desire. Nothing in the poem indicates that the poet is disappointed with the images available to him and poetry's ability to adequately represent the airman's death. What makes MacGreevy a modernist is precisely this lack of concern with whether or not art can make anything of life what so ever. The poem is only "awkward and inadequate" if the reader expects it to do justice to, or provide a proper and dignified representation of, a soldier's death. As if to anticipate a reading like Mays's, MacGreevy makes a sort of joke at the end of the poem.

My sergeant says, very low, 'Holy God!

'Tis a fearful death.'

Holy God makes no reply

Yet. (44-7)

MacGreevy here is making less of a statement about the limitations of art and more about the ridiculousness of the question itself. One representation is just as worthless as the next, whether it pretends to be adequate or not. Besides, to be adequate or even to try is not the point in the poem. The representation is not, as Mays would have it, any sort of "attempt." The poem happens because of, not for, the airman's death.



Alex Davis attributes MacGreevy's modernism in this sense to a break with realist strategies:

MacGreevy's modernism, fully cognisant of the psychological and social effects of the Great War, seeks to avoid the shortcomings of both 'realism' and aestheticism. Without belittling the horror of MacGreevy's experiences during the war, the impossibility of adequately representing it in its totality is at one with the general predicament of modernist writers (including Yeats) disabused of realist aspirations . . . The war, in other words, is an event that throws into relief a more diffuse sense of a crisis in the representational capacity of art . . . (Davis 22)

MacGreevy's use of non-realist painting techniques (or more aptly, his gestural brush-strokes) navigates this boundary between realism and aestheticism by acknowledging the ultimate inadequacy of any approach when faced with world war.

That MacGreevy studied painting professionally is especially noticeable in his poetry's similitude to the WWI-era painting of Henry Lamb, Wyndham Lewis, William Roberts, Paul and John Nash, Stanley Spenser, Gilbert Spenser, Eric Kennington, and C.R.W. Nevinson. Samuel Hynes has described six features of these painters' work which find their corollaries in MacGreevy's poetry: space derationalized and defamiliarized with impossible vantage points and a background that disappears or disintegrates; no habitable forms; no natural forms; human figures which are absent, distorted, or mechanized; no visible spectator; and no familiarity with English (or in this case, Irish, as the home territory) landscape (Hynes 196). The principles of war painting are disfigurement, danger, desolation, ruin, and chaos (200). "It is though the war had annihilated Nature, and with it the whole tradition of Romantic landscape," (196) Hynes writes; the paintings were "more like elegies for the death of landscape" (199). The relation of

man and nature has fundamentally changed. “Natural beauty and natural benevolence have withdrawn from the ravaged scene; and man is no longer secure and at ease there.” Nature becomes an absence which is replaced by war, and war marks the end of beauty to the extent that the embrace of ugliness becomes a kind of truth-telling (201). MacGreevy’s “Autumn, 1922” is the shortest and most exemplary of the war poems which employ these techniques: “The sun burns out,/ The world withers/ And time grows afraid of the triumph of time.” Here we have no habitable structures, as the world itself cannot support life; natural forms distorted (or withered); no home landscape with which to be familiar; no human figures; and the deregularization of time, which in its self-doubt stands in for the missing subject or spectator.

Although “Golder’s Green” and “De Civitate Hominum” specifically invoke the Great War, their treatment of landscape in relation to warfare is quite different. While “Golder’s Green” is more conventional in its treatment of landscape, “De Civitate,” as we have seen, takes a different turn. In it MacGreevy mocks the classic landscape painting by distorting its elements: the whiteness of purity and life becomes the whiteness of bones; his ‘canvas’ of sorts cannot support life (“’Tis still life that lives,/ Not quick life”) but becomes rather the runway for a series of disembodied wardrobe pieces (“Zillebeke Lake and Hooze,/ Ice gray, gleam differently,/ Like the silver shoes of the model; “There are fleece-white flowers of death/ That unfold themselves prettily/ About an airman”; “And he streams down/ Into the white/ A delicate flame,/ A stroke of orange in the morning’s dress”). Departing a bit from Hynes’ painters, MacGreevy does write in two spectators. The first is the poem’s speaker, but he quickly becomes a mere pretty thing in the fashion show’s grim inventory whose *life-like* qualities are embellishments.

And, what with my sensations

And my spick and span subaltern’s uniform,

I might be the famous brass monkey,

The *nature morte* accessory. (“De Civitate” 25-8)

The second spectator, the speaker’s sergeant, interjects a living presence in this uninhabitable place by explicitly acknowledging human loss; and yet he must say it “very low” as if it were engulfed in the sterility of the scene.

As the title of the poem suggests, “Autumn, 1922” could easily have been written in response to the Irish situation; indeed, although it does not address WWI, it brings the same techniques to bear on the Irish civil war. Similarly, in “The Six Who Were Hanged,” MacGreevy simultaneously invokes a European sense of modernist alienation and despair and lambastes the tired Irish appeal to long-dead symbols of cultural continuity. The very first line contains the poem’s major aesthetic distortion. “The sky turns limpid green”—as opposed to bright, active, patriotic Irish green—and continues with its bitter criticism of nationalism and the attending human cost:

it will not be time, Not for silver and gold,

Not with green,

Till they all have dropped home,

Till gaol bells all have clanged,

Till all six will be hanging

In green, white and gold,

In a premature Easter. (13-19)

MacGreevy’s choice of “limpid” plays on the synchrony between the word’s suggestion of serenity and clarity and its reminder of the limp bodies of the six, countering a bright, patriotic green to one that asks for contemplation rather than celebration. Or, differently, MacGreevy

reads the Irish emphasis of the Easter story on the necessity of death rather than the promise of resurrection, which is absent from the poem save a vague gesture toward a historical fulfillment hardly worth its cost. And who is there to witness this tragedy? Only “The white-faced stars” (31) who are “silent,/ Silent the pale sky” (31-2) and the speaker who calls his own role into question (“Why am I here?” [43]) and who has been emptied of the capacity for an appropriately human emotional response to the loss of life.

Tired of sorrow,

I go from the hanged,

From the women,

I go from the hanging;

Scarcely moved by the thought of the two to be hanged (53-7)

The speaker’s alienation is not total here—he, along with the women who “perhaps” “have Easters” (41) (modernist alienation is apparently gendered) participates in a spiritually communal moment as he says in the last line of the poem, “*Pray for us*” (59). Despite the fact that the speaker asks in the penultimate stanza, “What, these seven hundred years,/ Has Ireland had to do/ With the morning star?” (60-2) he nevertheless spiritualizes the moment, if only as a last resort. Still, there is no hope in the poem, no promise of mending or of new life, and as in his other poems, little desire left either. As he writes in “Gloria de Carlos V,” “My rose of Tralee turned gray in its life/ A tombstone gray,/ Unimpearled” (15-17).

MacGreevy’s Irish landscape becomes a space for lament in a poem that thematically has nothing to do with war but still bemoans Ireland’s cultural bankruptcy. In “Homage to Jack Yeats” the landscape is familiarly Irish, but less idealistically than its former self.

I thought how this land, so desolate,

Long, long ago was rich in living,  
More reckless, consciously, in strife,  
More conscious daring-delicate  
In love. (8-12)

The tower, that symbol of ancient Irish strength celebrated by Yeats and complicated by Joyce, becomes bent (13). It is only a visual effect produced by the speaker driving past at a high rate of speed, but it becomes a metaphor still, and reminds us of the shadow of war even in a poem not explicitly about it.

The gold years  
of Limerick life  
Might be but consecrated  
Lie,  
Heroic lives  
So often merely meant  
The brave stupidity of soldiers,  
The proud stupidity of soldiers' wives. (19-26)

Here he reevaluates *all* of Ireland's 'proud' history, so that the wistful lamentation of the first stanza is undone. There is no truly heroic past to which to return. It has all been warfare and the lie of heroicism. Similarly, in "Gloria de Carlos V," the lie of return is personal for a soldier who finds Ireland changed.

When we come back from first death  
To our second life here  
It is no longer the same Christianity . . .

Here 'twas scarlet and black,  
Green and black,  
Starch white streaked with cadaver black. (1-3; 9-11)

“De Civitate” approaches modernist experimentation regarding landscape, but pales in comparison to MacGreevy’s Dali-esque “Homage to Hieronymus Bosch.” Here again human figures are present but disfigured

A woman with no face walked into the light;  
A boy, in a brown-tree norfolk suit,  
Holding on  
Without hands  
To her seeming skirt .(1-5)

and, ghostlike, ambiguously neither living nor dead:

And the shadowy figures began to stir  
When one I had thought dead  
Filmed slowly out of his great effigy on a tomb near by  
And they all shuddered. (20-3)

Unlike the blankly rural landscape of other poems in the collection, this one is set at Trinity College, moving urbanity and the Protestant tradition into the foreground rather than the rurality and Catholicism of nationalist rhetoric. Trinity and Dublin are still iconic Irish images, however, and MacGreevy intends to extend the pall over them as well, as if no version of Irishness is safe

from the end of beauty as the result of war<sup>15</sup>. MacGreevy announces the poem's relation both to painting and to a specific kind of aesthetic in its title, which refers to the fifteenth-century Dutch painter known for his depiction of the disembodied, the monstrous and the fallen. In third painting of Bosch's triptych, "Garden of Earthly Delights," nude human figures in hell are tortured by animal-like monsters with exaggerated features. MacGreevy's setting is an urban hell

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<sup>15</sup> Although the poem does not specifically name war as a theme, the Irish Civil War is its impetus, at least in terms of its drafting. Susan Schreibmann's notes on the poem excerpt a letter in which MacGreevy explains the biographical origins of the poem:

When I was a student a number of us, 17 in all I think, who were ex-British officers asked the Provost of Trinity College, Dublin to send an appeal on our behalf for the reprieve of a student of the National University who was captured in an ambush and condemned to be hanged. It was believed he had been tortured by the Black and Tans and our appeal was that he be reprieved only long enough for it to be verified that he had British justice and not torture. Only two or three of the signatories were nationalists. But the Provost refused to have anything to do with the appeal and Kevin Barry was hanged. We were the inhabitants of the nursery in the poem. John Bernard the nursery governor, etc. The well of Saint Patrick is in the grounds of Trinity College, Dublin which used before the Reformation or up to Elizabethan times to be the Abbey of All Hallows.

The relation between the poem and its biographical origins rests in repression signaled by the horrific. Not only is nature exceeding the bounds of an urban container (curiously punctured by escape valves in the sewer drains—the biological can both be cleansed and contaminate through the same channels), but in MacGreevy's commentary, the scourge of domination extends to human interactions as well. The nursery governor silences the effigy that emerges to speak to the faceless woman, squelching any life he might have left. "*Say nothing, I say, say nothing, say nothing!*" And he who had seemed to be coming to life/ Gaspd,/ Began hysterically, to laugh and cry,/ And, with a gesture of impotent and half-petulant despair,/ Filmed back into his effigy again."

in which already-dead but suffering humans are tortured by rats, as nature in the urban context becomes violent, repressive, and menacing.

Then, from the drains,  
Small sewage rats slid out.  
They numbered hundreds of hundreds, tens, thousands . . .  
The woman with no face gave a cry and collapsed.  
The rats danced on her  
And on the wriggling words  
Smirking. (42-4; 52-5)

The remainder of MacGreevy's *Poems* deals conventionally with landscape. "Homage to Marcel Proust," MacGreevy's love-poem to the richness of Proustian images, whose densely described objects are so weighty with meaning, creates a landscape that is natural, undistorted, familiar, and with normal perspective. "The sea gleamed deep blue in the sunlight/ Through the different greens of the trees" (1-2). At the end of the poem the characters are dead but "the waves still are singing." The diversity of MacGreevy's poetic in the collection illustrates both the complexity of modern life independent of and entangled with the battlefield, and the large field of possible modernist responses. Consider the contrast between a poem like "Homage to Hieronymus Bosch" with its faceless and limbless half-dead, overrun with rats, and "Gioconda," MacGreevy's homage to the *Mona Lisa*, whose whole text I quote here:

The hillsides were of rushing, silvered water,  
Down,  
And around,  
And all across,



And about the white, gleaming tree-trunks,  
Far as sensitive eyesight could see,  
On both sides of the valley,  
And beyond,  
Everywhere,  
The silvered swirling water!

The clouds,  
Blue-gray  
Lined with pink  
And edged with silver,  
Meditated.

The sun did not rise or set  
Not being interested in the activities of politicians.

White manes tossed like spray.  
Bluish snakes slid  
Into the dissolution of a smile.

“Gioconda” takes a high modernist approach that recalls Yeats’ “Politics” or “Lake Isle of Innisfree” and reflects his reverence for Leonardo da Vinci, who MacGreevy regarded as a

fundamentally medieval, rather than Renaissance, painter.<sup>16</sup> This sort of poem, along with its immediate predecessor on the page, the short “Giorgionismo”

In the darkness  
I close my eyes  
To the German sadism on the screen  
And the recessionalist lovers  
Around me.

I recede too, Alone.

voices the desire to escape the horror of the present age, in “Gioconda” through nostalgia for a classical aesthetic (which we will also see to a greater degree in Devlin’s poetry) and in both, through the high modernist desire to recede from war and politics into the realm of art alone<sup>17</sup>. In “Gioconda” white and silver are here, after “De Civitate,” restored to their luminous life-affirming associations. The world of the poem is inhabitable.

“Nocturne of the Self-Evident Presence” engages high modernism through demonstration rather than rhetoric. Landscape is neither conventional nor distorted; spatially the poem is realist, but its features here do not function as emblems of nation, culture, and religion, as was typical for Irish treatments of landscape. It is instead the vehicle for an aesthetic (wishing to be) stripped

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<sup>16</sup> MacGreevy, Thomas. “Leonardo da Vinci” in *The Capuchin Annual*. Dublin. 1953-54. pp.135-154.

<sup>17</sup> High modernism cannot be reduced the desire for escape, however much outdated scholarship would have it so. In this case I merely refer to one impulse in high modernism that becomes rather complex in poetry like that of Eliot and Pound.

of time and human reference; the “I” stands outside the poem as if it were a painting hanging on the wall. In its entirety:

Fortunate  
Being inarticulate,  
The alps  
Rise  
In ice  
To heights  
Of large stars  
And little;  
To courts  
Beneath other courts  
With walls of white starlight.  
They have stars for pavements,  
The valley is an area,  
And I a servant,  
A servant of servants,  
Of metaphysical bereavements,  
Staring up  
Out of the gloom.

I see no immaculate feet on those pavements,  
No winged forms,

Foreshortened,  
As by Reubens or Domenichino,  
Plashing the silvery air,  
Hear no cars,

Elijah's or Apollo's  
Dashing about  
Up there.  
I see alps, ice, stars and white starlight  
In a dry, high silence.

Between “Homage to Hieronymus Bosch” and this poem we see the transition from an aesthetic that returns to a pre-modern fear of nature (of which rats and disease serve as reminders in industrialized times) to one that sublimates, or silences, this fear while simultaneously allowing it to “speak” through that very silence. “If the language of nature is mute,” Adorno writes in the “Natural Beauty” portion of his *Aesthetics*, “art seeks to make this muteness eloquent” (Adorno 78), and indeed we find MacGreevy attempting to negotiate his admiration for the “spoken” eloquence of Renaissance painting with his modernist sense of the failures of language and representation after large-scale warfare. The result is “Nocturne,” which imitates natural beauty in its desire for (“dry, high”) silence (Adorno 69) and in its elevation of the object to primacy ahead of the subject (71) who here is relegated to the position as a “servant of servants.” Still, the speaker limits the scope of the picture that despite the subject’s loss of status is determined by his gaze. And the speaker’s tight control over the images in the poem, including its express prohibitions (“I see no immaculate feet on those pavements,/ No winged forms . . . hear no

cars”), emphasizes the degree to which the speaker uses the problems of silence and speaking to seek consolation from the horrors of modern life MacGreevy has articulated in other poems. The single statement of desire in the opening line of the poem, “Fortunate,” in some ways contradicts MacGreevy’s seeming lack of desire in other poems in which despair is unmediated by any hope of an alternative. Of course the “alternative” posited here—a silence only achievable by the already “inarticulate”—is, like all other objects of desire in MacGreevy’s poems, entirely unreachable. Still, its contemplation is some kind of desperate consolation, as the speaker contrasts the Alps’ lack of imperative to speak to his own position as a slave-poet: “And I a servant,/ A servant of servants/ Of metaphysical bereavements.”

The poem’s function is not, however, to provide comfort but to assert a kind of aesthetic that, while far from matching the ability of the Alps to speak through being, nevertheless might at least match the demands of the present. There is a rich irony in the notion that MacGreevy’s creation of an ahistorical landscape ‘painting’ should speak to the moving, living present better than, say, a more realist depiction of Irish cultural realities. Does the poem’s uninhabited city represent what art (as human artifact) might look like if it were able, in Adorno’s formulation, “with human means to realize the language of what is not human. . . ;” and does “Nocturne of the Self-Evident Presence,” in its acknowledgement that “the language of nature is mute” make “this muteness eloquent” (Adorno 78)? If modern warfare, which laps at the edges of “Presence” in its revisiting of European landscapes which are sites of conflict in other poems, occasions the return of the primitive fear of nature, is nature’s own response—silence—also possible for an art made of language? What is appealing to the speaker about the Alps is that they constitute an *architecture* of self-evidence; humanly fantasized ornamentation (“immaculate feet,” “winged forms” “cars,/Elijah’s or Apollo’s”) is dispensable, unnecessary, distracting. However much

MacGreevy admired Baroque painting the structure of natural beauty is what he aims for in *his* time, so that the ideal poem mirrors the self-evidence of nature. “What in artworks is structured, gapless, resting in itself, is an afterimage of the silence that is the single medium through which nature speaks” (Adorno 74).

To the extent that it appeals to silence and the end of language, “Presence,” recalling Patricia Rae’s words on melancholia, constitutes “an ethically satisfactory response to loss” on MacGreevy’s part, one that acknowledges the incongruity of even the aesthetics he most admired (classical and Renaissance painting) with the demands placed on a poet writing after a world war and in a time of considerable political and social upheaval. Silence does not attempt to remake a nation with nationalist rhetoric, does not insist on a fabricated and ultimately untenable continuity with tradition, does not reclaim images of horror, loss, alienation, and displacement to affirm the publicly celebrated narrative of necessary conflict. “Presence” does not achieve this silence—it can’t—but does provide, in the strong, short lines of the first stanza, the sparseness of its images, and in its systematic dismissal of anything baroque, silence’s melancholic architecture.

## SAMUEL BECKETT: THE PROFANE AND RADICAL HUMANISM

For poets of this period, Ireland-as-home/origin is a powerful and problematic concept. Conventional cultural-nationalist discourses of mid-twentieth-century Ireland—particularly those regularly advanced by public officials—posit Ireland (as a physical, spiritual, and metaphorical space) as the birthplace for all “good” Irish things. As we see especially in MacGreevy’s poetry, historical circumstances such as Irish citizens’ involvement with WWI serve to challenge this notion of secure origins; before the others’ time, however, the Civil War does something similar for Yeats. I see the poetry of this period as continuing the work of interrogating the notion of origins in ways that generate multiple and more inclusive versions of Irishness. Beckett (and Joyce, in prose) is (are) especially helpful on this last point, as physical distance from Ireland in the form of voluntary exile coupled with Irish subject matter creates space for complex notions of Irishness to emerge.

Beckett’s poetry is not only entirely devoid of nostalgia but works against notions of origin; Beckett is not a romantic modernist. Beckett’s speaker in his only full collection of this period, *Echo’s Bones* (1935), more or less accepts as inevitable and unavoidable the states of wandering, homelessness, and impending death. His is not a poetry of longing for either literal past or bygone era (as in Devlin and, to a large extent, Clarke), but one of living—and dying—in

the present. When the speaker—who remains more or less consistent throughout the collection, however unusual this is for Beckett's work—does look back it is to unshroud origins to the point that they are indistinguishable from the corruptions and perversions of the present. In other words, Beckett unravels time in *Echo's Bones* in ways that collapse present and past into one sustained experience of suffering. Like Clarke and Kavanagh, Beckett finds his poetic personae in the state of walking and wandering; but unlike them wandering and exclusion are not foils for home and are not imbued with the longing for it; in this sense he is closest to MacGreevy, though Beckett goes further in his explorations of rootlessness. Although Beckett's poetry is similar to MacGreevy's in that the home space is not available for return, in Beckett home is never the holy space in the first place. MacGreevy's nostalgia does not lie as heavily as that of the others but it acknowledges the home that once was; for Beckett home is no better or worse than wandering. Therefore to the question of cultural famine Beckett seems to answer that we have always been hungry.

Beckett's poetry is obsessed with ideas of exile, wandering, and exclusion. His speaker in *Echo's Bones* constantly negotiates the problem of writing about and for a cultural moment from a space outside it. Although the poetry in this collection takes place almost exclusively within Ireland, the speaker walks, literally in "Enueg I," the first poem of *Echo's Bones*, around the edge of the island, water lapping at his feet, upsetting its borders. Unlike Kavanagh, however, who both celebrates and minds his exclusion with expressions of longing for belongingness, Beckett revels in his status as a poet outside (as an expatriate as well as an unconventional poet). In Beckett's poetry, the energies which would have been directed toward an anxiety over a home space are redirected toward real physical bodies from which actual life is lived. His is a kind of



realism turned on its head, where sounds and smells—particularly ones that Irish poetry of this era avoided—take the place of photographic faithfulness to life as it is lived.

It is in fact this flaunting of his refusal to conform his poetry to the social conventions of mid-twentieth-century Ireland that brings Beckett most fully into sympathy with his audience; he suggests that rather than bringing us together, social mores surrounding the body serve rather to buffer both our understanding of life as it is actually lived and our ability to relate to one another as human beings. Beckett's profanity is no mere childish rebellion but rather the assertion of a radical humanism based on a flesh-and-blood notion of shared experience. Though his poetry challenges the Victorian mores of mid-twentieth-century Ireland in its saturation with sexual imagery and bodily functions and fluids (which made it impossible to publish within Ireland), these excesses do not stand as remedies for a repressed culture; but the acknowledgement of the body does argue for a pointedly unromantic alternative to Victorianism. To Kavanagh the bleeding Christ and the suffering ploughman and to Clarke the sexually freed woman are emblems of the celebration and holiness of the body as paths to a more potent spirituality. For Beckett, the body is nothing more than itself, and in this way his is the most thoroughly humanist poetry of this period.

Despite the large body of criticism on Beckett's prose and plays, very little attention has been paid to his poetry outside of Lawrence Harvey's exhaustive readings. The reason for this oversight may have to do with the fact that poetry accounts for very little of his output, similar, for example, to how Thomas Hardy is known mainly as a novelist and not as a poet; it may also be that studies of his poetry have not yet taken place in the context of Irish poetry of the time, so that those features of the poetry that become most salient when viewing him next to Devlin, MacGreevy and the others might be visible to critics who are unfamiliar with his lesser-

known contemporaries. In his essay on Beckett's poetry, Roger Little warns against limiting the study of Beckett's work to genre, offering *Waiting for Godot*, in its emphasis on the irrelevance of plot compared to the rhythmic and phonetic quality of language, as an example of the ways all of Beckett's work is, in a sense, poetry. Josephine Jacobsen and William R. Mueller concur, describing Beckett's poetic devices not as separate characteristics but "nuances of a living motion" (Jacobsen and Mueller 36) that forms Beckett's entire works as a kind of magnum opus, or one large poem (Jacobsen and Mueller 45). Moreover, as with the other poets in this study, relatively little has been written on Beckett's poetry, outside of Lawrence Harvey's long and detailed study, compared to the novels and plays. Aside from Harvey, high praise of his poems is infrequent. John Pilling finds "Beckett's early poems in English . . . uncomfortable reading" (Pilling 15) and *Whoroscope* as "too clever for its own good" (Pilling 187); John Fletcher dismisses *Whoroscope* as "little more than prose monologue chopped into lines of unequal length" with "lame puns" imitative of Joyce and adds, "in spite of its wit, the whole poem gives a frivolous impression; genuine poetic richness is lacking, for paradox, esotericism and verbal gymnastics take its place" (Fletcher 26). Never mind that "poetic richness," especially in its twentieth-century form, is often marked by "paradox, esotericism and verbal gymnastics," and that given the horrors of the mid-century Europe inside which he wrote, such poetry might make the reader uncomfortable indeed. Fortunately the body of criticism about Beckett's poetry takes his *poetics* seriously, and what has been written through his poetry as a way to get to the novels and plays has merit applied to the poetry alone.

Like Louis MacNeice, Beckett was Irish-born but spent considerable time elsewhere: but Ireland for Beckett, if one were to take even a cursory glance over his works, is originating, part of the landscape of youth and the launching point from which more important things would

come. In the context of other modern poets who called Ireland home, the concerns that are unique to Ireland (particularly the notion of cultural famine) *and* those shared with the continent (the modernist crisis of the subject, the role of tradition in modernity, the dangers of ideology) run through Beckett's poetry as well. The difference between Beckett's distrust of language and aesthetics and his aesthetic of failure and Devlin's and MacGreevy's is that Beckett's preoccupation with aging and impending death, like Proust's, offers a geography of mourning rather than a hollow keening. The title *Echo's Bones* attests to that focus on the anatomy of mourning and failure (the echo as belated, and therefore failed, speech). Beckett reads the notion of failure through the phenomenon of physical decline and death and the experience of being outcast. This mapping of the body and its exposure to the elements merges questions of language with more basic ones of existence; and what it means to be human inside a culture that authorizes one's humanity and effaces it in the same gesture.

Beckett's writing on Proust offers the best articulation of this geographic orientation. In this small book, Beckett formulates the predicament of the modern subject in terms of time and space, often as that of time operating *as* space. "Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous" (Beckett Proust 3). While part of the self, the past is also an object that is the result of the inevitable decomposition of time and life. "The individual is in a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multicolored by the phenomena of its hours" (Beckett Proust 4-5). In this matrix the self is merely a shell, a place where speech ricochets as in an echo chamber.

In Proust, for Beckett, the subject is simultaneously in a constant state of striving and decrepitude: “but what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject has died—and perhaps many times—on the way” (Beckett Proust 3). The subject encounters the object as banal and the desire is consequently unquenched. The object is not merely object, then, but a subject itself. “We are faced by the problem of an object whose mobility is not merely a function of the subject’s, but independent and personal: two separate and immanent dynamisms related by no system of synchronisation. So that whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, by definition, insatiable” (Beckett Proust 6-7). Thus life, both for subject and object, is motion; and though “the creation of the world did not take place once and for all time, but takes place every day” (Beckett Proust 8), the spiral of time is a downward one.

Beckett’s essay “Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce,” intended as a meditation on Joyce’s “Work in Progress,” carefully parses out the possible ways to approach circularity in relation to time. Linearity is not the only alternative. Time can be cyclical and spherical (Beckett Dante 253)—endlessly repeating births, maturations, deaths, and rebirths, as in Vico and Joyce—or it can be progressive and theological or “conical,” implying culmination, as in Bruno and Dante (Beckett Dante 244 and 253). In Joyce, drawing from this Vician construct, form and content fuse. “Here form *is* content, content *is* form” (Beckett Dante 248). There is nothing to come *from* and nothing to go *to*. Vico’s Providence “is not divine enough to do without the cooperation of Humanity” (Beckett Dante 248). Beckett’s evaluation of Joyce’s acceptance of the Vician construct is both praiseful and cynical. On the one hand, “Work in Progress” is “direct expression—pages and pages of it. And if you don’t understand it, Ladies and Gentleman, it is because you are too decadent to receive it.” (Beckett Dante 248). On the other hand, what is the point of all this direct expression which needs no Divine to long for? “And no more than this;

neither prize nor penalty; simply a series of stimulants to enable the kitten to catch its tail” (Beckett Dante 253). This penultimate line to an essay on other writers becomes at last the expression of Beckett’s own formulation of time, in which time, as in Vico and Joyce, is spherical, but also highly suspicious of anything approaching the ontological. Josephine Jacobsen and William R. Mueller write that Beckett’s universal protagonist, which they have named “Q,”

lacks, and craves, a center of significance, a *raison d’être* which will render endurable, or at least comprehensible, the horrifying manifestations which compose its existence. It is the sense of an intolerable deprivation, an irreparable absence, which haunts Q . . . the universe cannot produce a Caesar [or a God] but only a grotesque and constricted parody . . . the dark night of the soul without the Deity. (Jacobsen and Mueller 23-24)

Harvey’s reading of “Sanies I” explicates Beckett’s theme of end-less (where “end” indicates both purpose and terminus) circularity. Our first clue is in the first line of the poem, whose “sweet showers” references Chaucer and therefore pilgrimage. But this is not, of course, a satisfactory journey. “With whatever trust of panic we went out/ with so much shall we return.” The pilgrimage has not enlightened the pilgrim. This poem about Beckett’s own origins (“I was born with a pop with the green of the larches”) pokes fun at nostalgia, where his desire for the past is essentially to not-be or pre-be: “ah to back in the caul now with no trusts/ no fingers no spoilt love” (14-15). But this beginning is an end. “The cord has been cut, and the circle in space is a fiction. Only the straight, descending line of a man’s days is real” (Harvey 148) and thus the speaker of the poem resolves not to renew it. “Refusing to perpetuate the pain that is life, he

renounces his love and the ineluctable social cycle that continues man's misery" (Harvey 148). Beckett is "cinched to death in a filthy slicker."

In my reading Beckett's focus here is not so much the impossibility of return but the rejection of the very notion of pure origins. Beckett's chosen setting is also the ground for an ongoing debate about the nature of origins in terms of Irish national identity (was it continuous with a classical Gaelic past? Was the revival of the Irish Gaelic language necessary to rescue that continuity? What was the difference between recovery and reinvention?). In a geographically wider sense Beckett's rejection of origins speaks to high Modernist appeals to tradition in contrasts with other modernisms As in "Serena II," where the malevolent instincts of his dog lead to the abandonment of her puppies, the speaker imagines his birth in terms that emphasize the pain and mess of birth, focusing of course on the barely containable fluids that accompany it.

oh the larches the pain drawn like a cork

. . .

back the shadows lengthen the sycamores are sobbing

to roly-poly oh to me a spanking boy

buckets of fizz childbed is thirsty work

for the midwife he is gory

for the proud parent he washes down a gob of gladness (23; 26-30)

Beckett mixes clichés and fragments of the clichés of childbirth ("roly-poly," "spanking boy," "proud parent") with references to pain—physical and psychic—and unappealing, usually-ignored fluids. The cork becomes perhaps a mucous plug and not part of a celebratory bottle of champagne; the "fizz" shows up a few lines later to slake the thirst of the mother (or the midwife, as the line endings make ambiguous), not to signal the end of the process after the baby

has been carefully washed. When the boy is born he becomes, grammatically, the fluid that “washes down a glob of gladness,” again calling mucous to mind. Beckett’s use of assonance brings the reader’s attention back to the “gory” of the previous line, so that “gladness” is overwhelmed by mucosal and placental excess; and the short ‘o’ sound in “gobs” stretches out the sorrow of “sycamores sobbing.” The repeated “oh”’s call to mind the moans of labor and relate to the longer ‘o’ sounds and the Os of “roly-poly” and “gory.” Beckett’s use of corresponding vowels and consonants allows words that would normally be at odds to merge into odd terms that spoil the sanctity of a normally poetically whitewashed event. The consonant ‘g’ brings together “gory,” “gobs,” and “gladness;” ‘s’ recurs in “larches,” “sycamores,” and “spanking;” ‘p’ connects the “proud parent” and “roly-poly” to “pain” and “spanking.” Birth is not pure, it is gory, and associated not with the perfection of new life but, as the title suggests, a wound.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere in *Echo’s Bones* spring comes, as it does in “Enueg II” as a perverse beginning associated with poison (see discussion below), and in “Serena I” with “phlox”(3) but also “dead fish adrift” (5) and “gods/ pressed down and bleeding” (6-7).

Beckett’s compression of normally contradictory terms through assonance and consonance compresses time as well; for if the past is as gory and corrupt as the present there is no conceptual gap between the two, and the time that has passed between them loses its meaning. The speaker of “Sanies I” technically recalls his birth upon his “brief prodigality” (34), but the description of his birth is every bit as nasty as that of his corrupt young-adult self.

good as gold now in the prime after a brief prodigality

yea and suave

suave urbane beyond good and evil

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<sup>18</sup> Ackerley and Gontarski identify the term “sanies” as “a morbid discharge from infection or wound.”

biding my time without rancour you may take your oath  
distraught half-crooked courting the sneers of these fauns these smart nymphs  
clipped like a pederast as to one trouser-end  
sucking in my bloated lantern behind a Wild Woodbine  
cinched to death in a filthy slicker (34-41)

Beckett profanes the convention of the golden boy who returns to his country home from a life of success in the city; 'city slicker' becomes "filthy slicker," and the "suave and urbane" young man is compared to a "pederast," a particularly distasteful reference in a poem about a child's birth. The image of the speaker "sucking" on a cigarette recalls the nursing of the newborn (see line 32, "beestings" or colostrum). If there is a sense of circularity in the poem, it is pointless one; either the point of origin was never pure in the first place or the experience that comes with the only-forward trajectory of age inalterably colors the way the speaker understands the nature of origin. If the latter is true then it is not very different from the former. In either case the only purpose time serves is to bring one closer to death; even then, the difference between youth and age has collapsed.

"Serena II" makes similar moves to "Sanies I," only this time birth is a memory within a dream, and the mother is the speaker's dog, twitching with what the speaker imagines to be a birthing nightmare. The mention of larches in lines 30 and 51 refers back to "Sanies I," but "Serena II" is directed more toward the theme of abandonment than "Sanies I," which at least briefly mentioned a parent's care, no matter how attenuated. In "Serena II" the troubled return to origins is corrupted not only by the acknowledgement of the attending pain ("she thinks she is dying" in lines 15 and 26) but by the nature of return, which takes the form of nightmare rather than happy homecoming. Here, too, there is no point in return: "there is no going back on/ a rout



of tracks and streams fleeing to the sea” (30-31); “with whatever trust of panic we went out/ with so much shall we return” (35-36). Beckett collapses time through the short-circuitry of epilepsy (as the poem begins, in a one-line stanza, “this clonic earth”)—which suggests a random electrical storm instead of a well-ordered progression—and simultaneous presence of the speaker as witness to the dream in the present and the presence of the past within in the dream. The poem complicates this layering of moments by switching the speaker’s voice from that of narrator of the dog’s dream to one of her pups in stanza five, so that the speaker is simultaneously on the inside and outside of the dream, all the while superimposing his own birth narrative.

For all the unhappiness of “Sanies I,” “Serena II” outdoes it with violence. The “clonic earth” of the first line gives way to the back-and-forth wrench of the second stanza.

see-saw she is blurred in sleep  
she is fat half dead the rest is free-wheeling  
part the black shag the pelt  
is ashen woad  
snarl and howl in the wood wake all the birds  
hound the harlots out of the ferns  
this damfool twilight threshing in the brake  
bleating to be bloodied  
this crapulent hush  
tear its heart out (2-11)

“See-saw” signals the back-and-forth movement as physical and literal, so that when we encounter “part the black shag the pelt/ is ashen woad” and “crapulent hush,” they are more than contradictions. They dramatize the violence that permeates everything, down to the dog’s skin

and into even quiet spaces. Against the notion of birth as resonate and harmonious with a balanced, natural world, the dog crashes through the birds and ferns to find a place to deliver her pups, to “tear its heart out.” Though the dog searches for a safety—both a safe place to deliver and an escape from the violence of her own body—there are no safe spaces. In the panic of her flight the dog drives out the vulnerable (birds) and the outcast (harlots), with which she herself can identify; her search for safety cancels itself out and she is left with nowhere to turn. Harvey notes that the birth takes place in the evening as the light moves west—from which the Kerry Blue Terrier originates—so that the dog’s escape is into the death (94). Beckett’s reversal of the correspondences between light/life and darkness/death resonates with Austin Clarke’s reversals in “The Young Woman of Beare” from *Pilgrimage* and the entire collection *Night and Morning*. The world turns on itself and we are left with no refuge.

Even in the violence of the dog’s search she is the ignorant victim of nature; all she knows is that she “thinks she is dying,” and in her failure to understand what is happening to her she is also “ashamed” (26), and it is this shame that compels her to victimize the next generation. In a reference to the very first mother, suggesting that the legacy of shame and abandonment runs to the very beginning of human life, the dog, “like a woman making to cover her breasts/. . . left me” (33-34). But it is an Irish shame as well, to which the references to Croagh Patrick (18), the “islands of glory” (19), the various Irish place-names in the poem, and the “hag”<sup>19</sup> in which she “drops her young” in line 23. And of course the dog herself hails from Kerry in the west of Ireland. Beckett artfully fuses panic and shame here, both as inherent conditions of living, and

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<sup>19</sup> Literally here “hag” refers to the hallucinatory state between sleep and wakefulness, which would be consistent with references to epilepsy in the poem, though the hag of Irish folklore comes to mind as well.

simultaneously, of dying. His use of a dog here instead of a human woman giving birth emphasizes the primal, instinctual, bodily nature of birth.

In this sense Beckett's notions of time directly relate to his separation of the subject from its beingness, or its humanity, so that his writing settles on neither religious nor secular notions of *raison d'être*. This is not to say that his writing lacks an ethic. Far from it: Beckett's experimentations with language directly engage cultural constructs that, at least in part through language, dehumanize us already. Writing about Beckett's rejection of the figural in his collection of short prose pieces, *Fizzles*, Shira Wolosky remarks,

if the human element is missing, it is the language we use that is responsible for the abdication—a language for which we must, in turn, take responsibility. In Beckett, our human worlds are exposed as fundamentally linguistic. It is through our uses of language that we define the world we inhabit. Beckett's work offers, that is, an anatomy of discourse as the condition in which we live our lives and, above all, realize our values. (Wolosky 54-55)

Jacobsen and Mueller read Beckett's work as a poetry of empathy (Jacobsen and Mueller 35) without moral law (11). In the poetry empathy is often cloaked—or rather, exposed—in the profane. In “Malacoda,” from *Echo's Bones*, the space between the undertaker's man's dispassionate task (measuring the body of the speaker's father for a coffin) and the sacredness of mourning erupts with the undertaker's fart. The poem allows for several attempts at evasion or avoidance: first the undertaker's man “impassible behind his scutal bowler,” as he evades death behind the office of the undertaker symbolized by his hat; then the son's attempt to hide the man's indiscretion from his mother, whose mourning he is trying to protect:

find the weeds engage their attention

hear she must see she need not

. . .

to cover

to be sure cover cover all over

your targe allows me to hold your sulphur (13-14; 19-21)

and the poem's wide circle around the death itself. The fart threatens these evasions with the biological. The undertaker's man is no mere functionary, but a body with processes—processes he is incapable of suppressing even in his office—common to all human bodies. The mother's sacred space of mourning depends upon her husband being something other than a body, and despite the son's desperate need to protect her from this reality, "hear she must see she must." It is not just the fact of the father's death that must be accepted, but that death, like the fart, is a reminder of the simple biological fact that the basis of our humanity is flesh, not spirit. Thus Beckett posits a radical humanism based not on political or religious authorization but in biology, and particularly in bodies' common experience of suffering. That suffering can be physical or psychic; in "Malacoda" the breaking of the sacred space for both the speaker and his mother is the cause of considerable pain. At first it seems that the speaker is only interested in protecting himself from the reality of his father's body, but at the end of the poem we find the protest. "hear she must see she must/ all aboard all souls half-mast aye aye" and after a stanza break, "nay." Harvey describes this moment as the "tension between revolt and resignation" that characterizes much of Beckett's writing (Harvey 110). Beckett's empathy (Harvey argues that compassion in "Malacoda" is not just artistically useful but central) lies in this tension, at the nexus between bodies and the recognition, or rejection, of ourselves as bodies. He does this without a moral law that would require bodies to point beyond themselves to a divine or a polity.

In order to appeal to moral law bodies must also have souls or house citizens. Bodies as bodies is the most basic (and only) form of a community based on empathy—in all other forms of community there is something that would disqualify someone. When bodies exist as bodies, not even dead bodies<sup>20</sup> are exempt.

Beckett's radical humanism has consequences for the subject as well, for if the subject is primarily a body its *raison d'être* evaporates. This does not, however, arrest the subject's movement or empty it of desire, especially as the subject's unmet desires create Dantean suffering. Suffering is the central fact of the subject's existence. "Q is torn . . . between two forces: the lusting after nothingness and the voice, distant, unintelligible, pitiless, which prevents his sinking into the void so desperately desired" (Jacobsen and Mueller 7). Q's greatest desire is to disappear, but he is dogged by a voice that insists he continue. The opening poem of *Echo's Bones*, "Enueg I," which finds the speaker taking a walk, sets the whole collection in motion; nearly half of the poems—"Sanies I," "Serena I," "Serena II," "Serena III," function as perambulatory meditations of one kind or another. In these poems every step is either motivated by or characterized by the subject's psychiatric suffering in which the mind functions as part of the body. In "Enueg I" the speaker begins his walk at the site of physical suffering, the "Portobello Private Nursing Home" where he is "tired of my darling's red sputum." Once again Beckett's choice of "sputum" over another softer, less crude term brings the body and its biological realities into immediate focus, and emphasizes the revulsion that drives the speaker out of the hospital and into his walk. Beckett weds the physical and mental suffering in the second stanza:

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<sup>20</sup> Poetry written about and by soldiers in WWI also engages the discourse of bodies as bodies in this way, as in a number of cases dead bodies become both speakers and subjects.

my skull sullenly  
clot of anger  
skewered aloft strangled in the cang of the wind  
bites like a dog against its chastisement. (12-15)

However, as Harvey details in his reading, there is no possible escape from suffering. The landscape takes on the tenor of the speaker's hopeless mood, turning a usually brilliant, fresh, green Ireland into a repulsive deathscape.

the world opening up to the south  
across a travesty of champaign to the mountains  
and the stillborn evening turning a filthy green  
manuring the night fungus  
and the mind annulled  
wrecked in wind. (24-29)

The speaker's walk is circular, leading back to where he started and with no sense of escape or release from suffering. As the vitality runs out of both speaker and landscape, little by little, each encounter with the outer world adds to the evidence that flight is futile. There is no escape from the universal plight of which the red sputum of his dying darling is only one among innumerable symptoms . . . we begin to realize that his trip through space is a metaphor that figures a segment of the declining trajectory of a human existence propelled through a brief stretch of time toward the tomb (Harvey 136-7) .

Revulsion is a useless impulse to the speaker, who cannot use it as the impetus or excuse for the abandonment of someone who suffers in an attempt to alleviate his own suffering. If the recognition of the unglamorous aspects of human suffering can lead to essential community

based on the commonality of bodies, it also produces a flight response in the speaker. But Beckett gives the speaker no choice but to identify with the suffering of bodies, whether it be the “child fidgeting at the gate” (38) who ““got put out,”” (44) the “lamentable family of grey verminous hens,/ perishing out in the sunk field, trembling, half asleep, against the closed door of a shed,/ with no means of roosting” (51-54) or “a small malevolent goat, exiled on the road,/ remotely pucking the gate of his field” (63-4). The speaker’s flight is voluntary, while the hens’ and the goat’s are not; but there is no difference for Beckett. To live outside, by choice or by expulsion, is to suffer; but in this land of exile a more essential form of relation is possible, one that is devoid of complex social rules (as in the football game) and confinement (as in the animals’ enclosures).

Beckett’s empathy therefore differs from Devlin’s and MacGreevy’s, which are based on a sympathy for ritual, because it appeals directly to the person whose body participates in the ritual. Beckett’s speakers do not kneel, even in sympathy, with the faithful as MacGreevy’s “The Six Who Were Hanged,” and do not turn the recognition of the (however empty) need for religious observance into a longing for a past poetic, as in Devlin’s “Lough Derg.” Beckett’s poetry is profane rather than nostalgic. Unlike Yeats, who wishes that he “were young again/ And held her in my arms” (Yeats 151, lines 11-12), Beckett’s engagement with aging and decrepitude is not backward-looking; it acknowledges the reality of decay without the cushion of nostalgia. In “Echo’s Bones” Beckett widens the scope of decline to include mind as body, regarding all things as modalities of the biological. In it “sense and nonsense run/ taken by the maggots for what they are.” Beckett profanes the sacristy of the intellectual in the first line of the poem with his reference to the “asylum” which is “under my tread all this day;” that is, inescapable, always present. Through the collection the asylum refers to a hospital for the

physically ill but the additional cultural meaning of asylum as mental hospital is powerful here. The mental hospital is one of the few places in which the mind is acknowledged as a function of the body, where it is as subject to disease and decline as the rest of the body. Again, though, the poem does not express longing and despair but rather a sense of relief that all is passing. The lines “their muffled revels as the flesh falls/ breaking without fear or favour wind” recall the earlier “Malacoda,” which in our reading above posits breaking wind as an assertion of the biological as a disruption to meaning-making in the face of death. In “Echo’s Bones” the body and mind are free from both social conventions (favour) and the fear which is an inevitable byproduct of the longing inherent in mourning. Melancholia here instead acknowledges the total dominion, and total release, of death. Biology dictates the hegemony of decline, decay, and death.

*Whoroscope*, Beckett’s deadly funny poem about Descartes, nicely illustrates his preoccupation with decay, not necessarily just as the accepted wear of time on a person permitted by circumstance to grow old but also as the premature ending of a young life. The poem’s speaking subject, a farcical Descartes, is arrogantly frustrated by the serving of an egg just beyond its perfect ripeness. The poem begins, “What’s that?/ An egg?/ By the brothers Boot it stinks fresh. Give it to Gillot.” Beckett’s notes indicate that Descartes “liked his omelet made of eggs hatched from eight to ten days; shorter or longer under the hen and the result, he says, is disgusting.” The egg is not even recognizable as such to Descartes at this stage. Its window of worth as an object of desire for Descartes has passed before it has the chance to become anything but potential life; the time of its ripeness is not synchronized with the time of Descartes’ hunger. “Two lashed ovaries with prosticiutto?/ How long did she womb it, the feathery one?/ Three days and four nights?” Not only is the egg not to fulfill its potential destiny as the satiation of



Descartes' hunger or as a chicken who might continue the cycle of life, but the circumstances of its conception—prosciutto becomes prosticiutto—are suspect. It is not worthy of his consideration. "Give it to Gillot." (Beckett's notes: "Descartes passed on the easier problems in analytic geometry to his valet Gillot.") The speaker's contempt masks darker circumstances, however; the speaker does indeed yearn and mourn for the loss of potential life in the form of his deceased daughter,<sup>21</sup> as indicated by significant tone change further on.

And Francine my precious fruit of a house-and-parlour foetus!

What an exfoliation!

Her little grey flayed epidermis and scarlet tonsils!

My one child

scourged by a fever to stagnant murky blood. ()

This egg has a name; the prostitute is housed in a parlour; what was "lashed" is now "flayed."

The speaker's attitude is violently ambivalent, at once demonstrating a longing for the thing lost through mourning and a thorough rejection of it. Beckett finds nothing to admire in these extremes. Descartes is a ridiculous figure.

In Harvey's detailed explication of Descartes references, however, we see Beckett's assertions of the biological as all-encompassing. Descartes disputed the scholastic claim that the sacrament continues to exist without the substance to which it was attached; the sacrament to Descartes, as a "surface," is only an extension of substance, not independent of it. Everything is

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<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Harvey confirms the biographical nature of this reference on pages 20-21. However, Shira Wolosky cautions that while the reader should not dismiss Beckett's allusions, uncovering them nevertheless does not 'unlock' his poems, as they often resist identification, systematization, and direct correspondence with their supposed referents. Fittingly she writes that they "never permit proper footnotes" (Wolosky 66).

substance to Descartes, including our sense impressions (Harvey 26). Beckett calls the sacrament to mind in “watery Beaune,” or water and wine, and “stale cubes of Hovis,” or bread (Harvey 27).

“Enueg II” plays an interesting role in *Echo’s Bones* in that it specifically references the Irish struggle for independence (specifically, mentions of “congress” [20], O’Connell bridge [22], and “the overtone” [27], which with the others suggests Wolfe Tone, one of 1798’s martyrs) whereas the rest of the poems, while always localized, do not engage the subject of Irish politics. Beckett’s aim is not to make a bold political statement here, but to interrogate the role of the individual subject in history, particularly in the futility of his efforts and the ensuing weariness. The poem’s use of “the face,” which is both “too late to darken the sky” (6) and “too late to brighten the sky” (28) three times over its 29 lines emphasizes the humanity of the individual acting in the midst of heavily anthologized history *and* makes him anonymous by refusing to name him directly. Beckett does give him a voice, and the speaker of the other poems here becomes one with the historical figures he mentions.

sweating like Judas

tired of dying

tired of policemen

feet in marmalade

perspiring profusely

heart in marmalade

smoke more fruit

the old heart the old heart

breaking outside congress (12-20)

The hero here, to whom we are introduced to in the previous stanza as the suffering Christ attended to by Veronica, is anything but heroic; he is tired and heartbroken, not convinced of the effectiveness of his efforts, and in the reference to Judas, not entirely sure whose cause he is advancing. The hero is both Christ and Judas, but whose side he is on is not important, because “the face” is too late to either darken or brighten the sky. The poem’s work is not so much to repeat the tired trope of the individual’s futility in the face of historical forces as, through its focus on the weariness of the body and the doubt on the part of the hero-identified speaker, to place the human into a troubled relationship with sanctioned history. Beckett’s use of “the face” denies the official record of a holy, martyred body to bury, mourn, and own, and his questioning of the hero’s motives and surety undermines the mythos of the martyr. Beckett here both universalizes *and* individualizes the martyr; he is “tired of dying,” as if the same figure dies over and over, but the descriptions of suffering also read as intimate confessions of disillusionment. The Christ/Judas/Wolfe Tone figure would rather be left alone than continue to serve history as a symbol of either good or evil. Beckett profanes the Christ figure in the fourth stanza, where the speaker demands that Veronica (which in the poem is not capitalized) “give us a wipe for the love of Jesus” (11), which taken with the entire collection in mind points to not just to perspiration but to defecation. In the second half of the fifth stanza—the first half of which is the expression of the hero’s weariness—Beckett profanes the cause of the specifically Irish nationalist hero in a move MacGreevy also makes in “The Six Who Were Hanged” by turning the patriotic Irish green into “tulips” (24) that are “shining round the corner like an anthrax” (25). Irishness, in its nationalist, separatist manifestation, is a poison. Beckett profanes both hero-worship and the causes for which heroes are deployed in order to bring the focus to the physical,

bodily humanity of the individual in history without allowing his suffering to become of service to ideology.

Beckett's poetry could not properly be labeled "realist" in a photographic sense, but in the sense that it invites—demands—that we not look away from elemental human experiences, particularly those which remind us of the abyss on either side of existence. The poetry presents the reader with an almost hyper-realist aesthetic, one that is in direct contradiction to the prevailing social mores of mid-twentieth-century Ireland. To speak of childbirth, the sexual encounters of youth, and the ravages of death in terms that refuse to bury them in symbology and to collapse the process of moving through life into one long, painful process of fluid consumption and expression is to demand that humans are made of nothing but bodies and to reject that idea that our commonality is based on anything else.

Throughout *Echo's Bones* Beckett's most bald engagements with the profane are in his treatment of sexuality. There are no married lovers here, as there are in Clarke, and unlike Clarke's, the poetry is not erotic. Unaccompanied by social sanctioning and ritual, sexuality is another fluid-producing human process unavoidably wedded to the messy beginnings of life and death. In addition to the frequent references to sex in poems dedicated to other themes, "Alba," "Dortmunder," "Sanies II," and "Serena III" focus on sexual encounters, the possibility of sex, or the desire for it.

"Dortmunder" relates most closely of all the poems to Beckett's writing on Proust. In it an encounter with a prostitute ("she stands before me in the bright stall" [5] and she is a "bawd" [13]) of Asian descent ("thin K'in music," [4] "jade splinters," [6] "the eyes the eyes black to the plagal east" [8]) produces not fulfillment but the death of desire itself.

Then, as a scroll, folded,

and the glory of her dissolution enlarged  
in me, Habbakuk, mard of all sinners.  
Schopenhauer is dead, the bawd  
puts her lute away. (10-14)

Beckett reverses the heterosexual act by making her enlarge inside the male speaker, instead of the other way around, but dissolves her in the same act, thus replicating the Proustian disappearance of the love-object at the moment of possession. Although the poem taken as a whole engages in crass essentialism of eastern women as objects available for use by western men, this moment does elide the speaker's attempt at possession and begins to dismantle her status as an object. In *Proust*, Beckett defines the resistance of the object to possession:

We are faced by the problem of an object whose mobility is not merely a function of the subject's, but *independent and personal*: two separate and immanent dynamisms related by no system of synchronisation. So that whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, *by definition, insatiable*. (6-7; emphasis added); all that is active, all that is enveloped in time and space, is endowed with what might be described as an abstract, ideal and absolute impermeability. (41)

The prostitute in "Dortmunder" does not exist in "time and space," at least as is allowed by the poem's representation, until the end at which point it is clear that her will—asserted by the putting away of the lute—defines her as an impermeable individual. The subject's will, by which it is defined as a subject, shrivels away as he becomes a "mard," or turd. Beckett's *Proust* does not explore the specifically feminist implications of his argument, but in this poem we can see how it is borne out an otherwise typically patriarchal encounter between a man and a prostitute. Her identity as an Asian prostitute emphasizes her subaltern status but also keeps Beckett's

conceptions of the body at the forefront. Taken together, the prostitute's dual representational functions assert the physical body as the site of irreducibility and impermeability. And this, in the end, is what makes us human: the point at which we are not available for use as objects is the point of our ethical commonality.

"Sanies II" engages Beckett's preoccupation with shame in its relation to sexuality and the body, and this time it is the speaker (male) who becomes the victim of violence. It is the most graphic of the sexual poems. Again the speaker is in a house of ill repute, but this time the encounter is broadly social and not confined to that between client and prostitute. It is a raucous scene, and the gleeful speaker in the beginning revels in filth.

there was a happy land  
the American Bar  
in Rue Mouffetard  
there were red eggs there  
I have a dirty I say hemorrhoids  
coming from the bath  
the steam the delight of the sherbet  
the chagrin of the old skinnymalinks  
slouching happy body  
loose in my stinking old suit  
sailing slouching up to Puvis the gauntlet of tulips  
lash lash me with yellower tulips I will let down  
my stinking old trousers

This opening consists of onomatopoeic lovemaking, where the ‘s’ sound in “slouching” (twice repeated, and surely cognizant of Yeats’s apocalyptic poem “The Second Coming”) inflects the pleasures of “steam” and “sherbet” with drowsiness and bolsters the laziness of “loose,” which also comes as the first word in line ten, which provides a contrast with the erections of “Serena III.” The speaker’s mispronunciation of “hennoroids” and “yaller” for ‘yellow’ suggests drunkenness. The poem does not recover the sexual encounter for a higher spiritual purpose or to emphasize the virility of the speaker—the opposite, in fact—but rather shamelessly flaunts the profane in the same breath as references to well-regarded high romantic painter Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and again to Dante. The result is a wanton rejection of the respectability of highly aestheticized and romanticized sexuality and also the denigration of art, in a respectable bourgeois sense of the term, itself. Harvey reads this ludicrous merger of life and literature, in which the most unappetizing things are made into poetry, along with the poem’s title.

“Alba” is the least graphic of the sexual poems but the most profane. The poem functions in two directions, one that reads the sheet as that on a lover’s bed and one that reads it as Christ’s burial shroud. The poem resists partial quotation, so I will reproduce it in its entirety here:

before morning you shall be here  
and Dante and the Logos and all strata and mysteries  
and the branded moon  
beyond the white plane of music  
that you shall establish here before morning  
grave suave singing silk  
stoop to the black firmament of areca  
rain on the bamboos flower of smoke alley of willows

who though you stoop with fingers of compassion  
to endorse the dust  
shall not add to your bounty  
whose beauty shall be a sheet before me  
a statement of itself drawn across the tempest of emblems  
so that there is no sun and no unveiling  
and no host  
only I and then the sheet  
and bulk dead.

Beckett foregrounds his preoccupation with Dante and introduces his theological interests in the second line. The language is not, as in the collection's other poems, directly descriptive of the body; in fact only the body's wrapping is here, and the fingers in the second half are instruments of grace rather than titillation. Instead the language creates an obscuring aestheticism, where the moon is "branded," or named, and the sky is a "black firmament of areca." Everything in the natural world is qualified, described, metaphorized. But what does all this artistry amount to? The second half of the poem suggests that for all its beauty, the ability to wrap the world in description ultimately does nothing. Here Beckett is most like MacGreevy, for aestheticization obscures rather than enables. This "tempest of emblems" reveals nothing, performs no redemption ("no host") and does not change the fact that the speaker is left alone with a sheet. Harvey, Ackerley and Gontarski divide "Alba" into three sections: the first, the anticipation of the lover's arrival (which Harvey identifies as akin to Beatrice [100]), second, the celebration of her presence, and third, disappointment and loneliness after the lover has withheld her affections. While these readings accurately identify the movement of the poem as it echoes the troubadour



dawn song (Harvey 82), they downplay the extent to which it merges the figures of the lover and of Christ to the point where the lover practically disappears by the end of the poem, where references to dust-writing and the shroud overtake the romantic images of the poem's first half.

But it is not the identification of Christ with the lover that performs the profane in the poem. It is rather the abdication of the idea that abandonment—either through the death of Christ, or the spurning of the lover—can produce something akin to redemption. The idea of abandonment connects the poem closely to “Serena II” and “Sanies I.” In this poem, however, the abandoner is not responsible for not returning. Resurrection will not be possible despite the intentions of the Christ/lover. What language obscures in the first half of the poem remains hidden (“no unveiling”) so that all that remains is the sheet itself, which is nothing but “a statement of itself.” Though Christ “stoop[s] with fingers of compassion/ to endorse the dust,” or to make meaningful the crude material of life on earth, nothing will be brought to life (“no host”). Beckett’s reference to Jesus writing in the dust in the Gospel of John anticipates the painful exploration of shame in “Serena II.” Though John does not reveal what is written in the dust, the implication is that language (and in some interpretations, knowledge of others’ sins) in some way diffuses the anger of the crowd and relieves the adulteress of her shame. In “Alba,” however, the act of compassion has no redemptory effect. Language—in this case, written language, or the literary—cannot give new life after condemnation. At this point, the merging of Christ and lover become confused, and the lover practically disappears. The only trace of her is in the poem’s tenuous hold on the troubadour dawn song form in the speaker’s dissatisfaction at the end of the poem and the continued double connotation of the sheet as bed-sheet and Christ-shroud. In this way Beckett’s poem departs radically from the Christ-as-lover motif in Kavanagh’s poetry, which desires to do away with the Church as it is but to keep the physical

Christ as the basis for spiritual life and unity. In Beckett there is no new life, no redemption, and no resurrection in the physical Christ represented as lover. His is an entirely secular humanism.

The last few lines of “Alba,” in which the sheet turns out to be merely itself and not the site for the uncovering of miraculous meaning, reassert the collection’s title and short title poem, “Echo’s Bones,” which I will quote in its entirety:

asylum under my tread all this day  
their muffled revels as the flesh falls  
breaking without fear or favour wind  
the gantelope of sense and nonsense  
taken by the maggots for what they are

Here, finally, is a succinct articulation of Beckett’s project in this collection, which is to merge the notion of the limits of representation with the human body, stripped. It is a geography of the body, where human bodies are real, physical places which are nothing but themselves: ageing, decaying bodies, which are “taken by the maggots *for what they are*.” Beckett’s poems are bodies, too, in various states of dress. “Echo’s Bones” is the nakedest of them all.

## “GOD’S TRUTH IS LIFE:” PATRICK KAVANAGH

At first blush it seems that all writing in Ireland after Yeats, especially poetry, is an attempt to wrestle with—and often discard—him. While this notion of struggle is integral to the problem of influence, it has a particular hold on the poetry of and criticism about mid-twentieth-century Ireland. One could explain this phenomenon neatly by citing the towering genius of W.B. Yeats, his success at revivifying ancient Irish myth and culture while simultaneously ushering in a peculiarly Irish modernism, and an importance that dominated both literary and political landscapes. Indeed Yeats was and did all these things, and writers did and do have to contend with his presence.

However, one other cultural preoccupation not looms larger Yeats’ influence. Patrick Kavanagh’s best known work, his long poem *The Great Hunger*, is the most direct expression of the presence and persistence of the Great Famine not only as a discrete historical event but as an idea that forms a particular vocabulary for, or allegorizes, the cultural situation of 1930s Ireland between cultural and literary revivals. Allegory operates on two levels in *The Great Hunger*. Kavanagh offers a correspondence between the historical-material details of the poem and those of the Ireland of his time, while the poem uses the same kind of detail toward the manifestation of a spiritual ideal (related to historical circumstances but unbound by time) already present in

Irish culture to amplify that ideal. In other words, the poem aims to be as transformative as it is reflective.

Language of poverty and dispossession was not new to the history of Irish literature, but the Famine provided additional weight to hunger as a salient feature of Irish life, particularly when the promises of Revival appeared to wither. Because Yeats was a driving force in the Revival, and perhaps because of the invidiousness of his personality throughout the many layers of Irish culture, he became the target for attacks on the arguments and assumptions the Revival as a whole disseminated. As an emblem of expansiveness and plenty, Yeats' life and work was the obvious place to draw a dark line between the ideals of the Revival and what writers like Kavanagh saw as its hollow underbelly.

The Famine was a presence in Irish history<sup>22</sup> well before the Revival got underway, and in many ways the memory of hunger may have contributed to the Revival's fuel. But Kavanagh regards the appeal to myth and tradition in response to hunger as Oedipal and therefore incapable of producing (and reproducing) the kind of cultural unity and pride based on continuity Revivalists strove to achieve. To Kavanagh, the Revival's solution—to reach back into Irish Celtic myth and make it new for the establishment of a coherent Irish identity—is akin to Beckett's endless and downward-spiraling circles, a serpent eating its own tail. Edward Larissey

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<sup>22</sup>For complete discussions of the Famine's place in Irish history, literature, and culture, see Christopher Morash's *Writing the Irish Famine* and (as editor) *The Hungry Voice: the Poetry of the Irish Famine*; Christine Kinealy's *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion*; and *The Irish Famine: A Documentary* by Colin Tóbin and Diarmaid Ferriter. These critics and historians speak at length about the tendency for forgetting, evasion, scapegoating, and conventionalizing the Famine on the parts of public officials and writers but attest to the ongoing desire for information and commemoration on the part of the general public.

reads Maguire's mother in *The Great Hunger* as the "real" Mother Ireland, "sick and a spreader of sickness" (Larissey 103) and weds this with Kavanagh's sense of nature's cycles not as opportunities for renewal but sterile traps (Larissey 104). Kavanagh's hints at a sexual relationship between the bachelor farmer and his domineering mother

Maguire was faithful to death:

He stayed with his mother till she died

At the age of ninety-one.

She stayed too long,

Wife and mother in one.

When she died

The knuckle-bones were cutting the skin of her son's backside

And he was sixty-five (II 1-8)

and frequent references to masturbation ("So Macguire got tired/ Of the no-target gun fired" [II 27-8]; "Pat opened his trousers wide over the ashes/ And dreamt himself to lewd sleepiness" [V 33-4]) and bestiality ("He saw his cattle/ And stroked their flanks in lieu of a wife to handle" [IV 41-2]) support Larissey's reading through their emphasis on the sterility of closed circles. The poem itself moves in relation to the seasons, but in the end nothing has changed for Maguire, his fields, or the people in his village. The fourth section finds Macguire running circles around his field after having contemplated sublimation of religious belief to the reign of Time. "He bowed his head/ And saw a wet weed twined about his toe" (54-5). In the fifth section, would-be opportunities turn out to be either worthless or not new in the first place. As in Beckett's poetry, time passes but does not progress, except toward the death of the individual who does not matter. "There is no to-morrow;/ No future but only time stretched for the mowing of hay/ Or putting an

axle in the turf-barrow” (25-7). The absence of a particular mower or axle-putter buries Maguire’s particularity utterly.

Antoinette Quinn reminds us that the Famine was not referred to as “The Great Hunger” until the 1960’s, a name that is drawn directly from Kavanagh’s poem, not the other way around (Quinn 179). Nevertheless references to famine abound in the poem, which is full of torn clothing, rusty ploughs, and unyielding earth.<sup>23</sup> In the first section the potato and Maguire’s genitals become metaphors for one another.

Turn over the weedy clods and tease out the tangled skeins.

What is he looking for there?

He thinks it is a potato, but we know better

Than his mud-gloved fingers probe in this insensitive hair. (39-42)

The potato, like Macguire’s prick (“The pricks that pricked were the pointed pins of harrows” [I 34]), was supposed to nourish and sustain life but did not. Because of the literal disaster (the potato blight), food production takes precedence over human reproduction; his mother’s insistence and his own compulsion to “ma[k]e the field his bride” (I 57) places food security over generational replication. In other words, mere survival is the enemy of life.

[Macguire] returned to his headlands of carrots and cabbage

To the fields once again

Where eunuchs can be men

And life is more lousy than savage. (II 29-32)

Indeed, in the fourth section the villagers gather at Mass as “five hundred hearts . . . hungry for life” (22).

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<sup>23</sup> Mention of torn clothing is frequent in Famine literature.

In *The Great Hunger*, however, rhetorical and poetic performance are often at odds, and the poem itself does not provide a neat piece of evidence for Kavanagh's anti-Revivalist arguments in prose, however much brief treatments of *The Great Hunger* assume it. It is easy to skim the poem and slow down only where Kavanagh seems to ask us to in plain, prose-like moments in which the speaker addresses the reader directly. The first moment comes quickly when Kavanagh introduces the poem as one would a play, inviting the reader to "watch" Macguire and the villagers along with him. Here Kavanagh doubts the romantic notion of peasantry and rurality as wellsprings of poetic energy and meaning.

If we watch them an hour is there anything we can prove

Of life as it is broken-backed over the Book

Of Death?

. . . Is there some light of imagination in these wet clods?

Or why do we stand here shivering? (I 4-6; 8-9)

It is Kavanagh's challenge to poetry: what can imagination do with peasantry that might resemble the truth of that life and not merely provide tourists with temporary spiritual renewal?

In section XIII Kavanagh is explicit about exploitation of peasantry, where

The world looks on

And talks of the peasant:

The peasant has no worries;

In his little lyrical fields

He plows and sows

. . .

*There* is the source from which all cultures rise,

And all religions,

*There* is the pool in which the poet dips

And the musician.

. . .

The peasant is the unspoiled child of Prophesy,

The peasant is all virtues (1-5; 18-21; 26-7)

This section along with Kavanagh's unrelenting details about the hopelessness of the lives of Maguire and his similarly starved neighbors is likely what Augustine Martin has in mind when he argues that *The Great Hunger* is an expression of anger against "the literary tradition that trivialized [the peasantry's] pain and humiliation," particularly "the carefree rural bachelor so prevalent in the kitchen comedies of [Yeats'] Abbey Theatre" (Martin 25). These figures are more complex than Martin allows, but Kavanagh's tendency throughout his career is, rhetorically anyway, to paint things with rather large brush-strokes.

Against these kinds of arguments and claims for Kavanagh's antipastoralism as distinct from Revivalism, Oona Frawley calls Kavanagh's bluff. She argues that Kavanagh's writing, *The Great Hunger* included, in its emphasis on rural life, landscape, and the natural world, however complicated with realism, is firmly within the pastoral tradition, and is so "largely because the Revival had existed to show him how, and because an Irish tradition of pastoral writing was long in place" (Frawley 83).<sup>24</sup> Although the Revival is responsible for amplifying an

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<sup>24</sup> While Frawley finds Kavanagh's inspiration primarily in an already-present Irish poetic, Eamon Grennan ("American Relations") credits American poetry, particularly that of Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and the Beat poets with the extent to which Kavanagh departs from his Irish predecessors.



existing pastoral tradition in Ireland, it did not invent it; Fourteenth-century Irish poetry, for example, marks the move away from an urban-centered nostalgic pastoral that continues to dominate in the English pastoral. Irish literature of the Middle Ages does *not* idealize rurality or nature (Frawley 76), and *The Great Hunger*, in its engagement with realism and the attempt to wrest the peasant from its symbolic framework, stands firmly in that tradition (Frawley 87). She argues further, following Edward Said, that what part of Revivalism did depend on nostalgia and idealization of rurality was a necessary step of decolonization with a limited shelf life; Yeats himself, after all, came to regret “The Lake at Inisfree” (Frawley 78-9).

Frawley’s reading of *The Great Hunger* gets right Kavanagh’s simultaneously elegant and biting reinvention of the peasant according to a barer poetic, but misses the extent to which Kavanagh’s poem still, despite its own rhetorical insistence,<sup>25</sup> engages in the idealization of nature (of the nostalgic version of pastoralism) and the typification of the peasant. Gregory Schirmer reads Kavanagh’s engagement with nature as a specific kind of romanticism, one that separates nature from nation (Schirmer 306) and regards the land in psychological and sexual, rather than political and economic, terms (301). But although the peasant is no longer the hope of the nation here, he *is* a symbol. *The Great Hunger* is not anti-pastoral; it is rather something more like a “dystopian” pastoral (or, for Schirmer, “true” romanticism, distinct from

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<sup>25</sup>The difference between “rhetorical insistence” and “poetics” here marks Kavanagh’s tendency to turn parts (or wholes, in other of his poetry) of poems into miniature podiums for his political and social views. In these moments (as in the above passage about depictions of the poet) the preaching, as it were, serves no other discernible purpose poetically, and the speaker’s and poet’s voices are indistinguishable. Such moments would appear to arise in Devlin’s poetry as well, but the presence of strong opposing voices provides the context for the reader to determine that speaker and poet are distinct.

romanticization [Schirmer 308]). Like Devlin, MacGreevy, and Beckett, Kavanagh's poetry, especially here, is infused with a sense of futility and failure. He recreates the peasant into a symbol for hopelessness and despair, at most two-dimensional. Although he has inner and outer lives—the outer attended to solely by those representations the poem opposes (“A man is what's written on the label” [IX 15] )—Maguire is the everypeasant here, so the inner lives of all, such as they have it, are the same.

First, though, *The Great Hunger*'s use of natural images and even its call for a better poetic confirms Frawley's observation that Kavanagh's poetry is still very much in the pastoral tradition, but in my reading Kavanagh's portrayal of the natural world is basically nostalgic; in the poem's capacity as manifesto for an insight-driven poetic, nature still serves as the site of pure inspiration. Kavanagh's version of the pastoral is neither purely utopian nor dystopian, but is able to simultaneously present nature, in its unfettered moments, as a wellspring of life and energy and rural life as potentially deadening. In section IX the speaker contrasts the beauty of rural life to its drudgery and despair and to the dry religiosity that is the enemy to life elsewhere in the poem.

Sometimes they did laugh and see the sunlight,  
A narrow slice of divine instruction.  
Going along the river at the bend of Sunday  
The trout played in the pools of encouragement.  
To jump in love though death bait the hook . . .  
The yellow buttercups and the bluebells among the whinbushes  
On rocks in the middle of ploughing  
Was a bright spoke in the wheel

Of the peasant's mill. (28-32; 38-41)

In the first section the natural world disallows Maguire to continue in his denial of the dire mistake he has made at the insistence of his mother.

But now a crumpled leaf from the whitethorn bushes  
Darts like a frightened robin, and the fence  
Shows the green of after-grass through a little window,  
And he knows that his own heart is calling his mother a liar.  
God's truth is life—even the grotesque shapes of its foulest fire. (75-9)

In this case “life” consists of the simple, true, natural world, Kavanagh's nod to the romantic notion of the sublime in the acceptance of even its “grotesque shapes.” Nature is the heart of wisdom in *The Great Hunger*, and Maguire's inability to listen to it causes the majority of his suffering.<sup>26</sup> “Nature” also consists of the movements of desire in Maguire's own body.

Antoinette Quinn observes that in this poem Kavanagh realigns sensuality and sexuality with the “true” Christianity (emphasizing the carnality of Christ) and sets it against the asceticism of the Irish Church, which sucks all life from the hearts of the people. To her the poem is a warning of the return of famine in part as a result of population decline (Quinn 178).

In addition, Kavanagh does not recover the peasant from a state of idealized one-dimensionality into a fully-realized human being—or into beings, as it were. Arguably Kavanagh turns him into something *worse*. The peasant of *The Great Hunger* is (still) simple, passive,

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<sup>26</sup> Of course “Nature” is also implicated in the suffering caused by the actual Famine of the mid-nineteenth century. In public discourse about the Famine in both Ireland and England the issue of whether it was a natural or man-made disaster is particularly contentious. For detailed discussions of this debate see Christine Kinealy's study, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion* and Christopher Morash's *Writing the Irish Famine*.

defined by his work, and nearer to animal than human (in section XI, “Illiterate, unknown, and unknowing” [69]), or in other words, no better than the primitivist image of the peasant he vocally opposed. Maguire does not have, as O’Brien argues, “a rich inner life;” Maguire has, despite O’Brien’s insistence, become an emblem. The first section of the poem establishes the villagers’ lack of will and helplessness against their repressive domestications. “Till the last soul passively like a bag of wet clay/ Rolls down the side of the hill, diverted by the angles/ Where the plough missed or a spade stands, straitening the way” (14-16). These are not souls endowed with particularity and will but things merely part of the earth and no more consequential than it. Every character in the poem is compared to a domesticated animal: the field workers have “heavy heads nodding out words as wise/ As the ruminations cows after milking” (V 2-3); Maguire’s sister is compared to a sow (V 33); in XII Maguire “looked like a bucking suck-calf/ Whose spine was being tickled” (15-16); the peasant of XII “in his little acres is tied . . . Like a goat tethered to the stump of a tree” (47; 49); In section XI the girls after which Maguire lusts are “heifer[s] waiting to be nosed by the old bull” (36). Always the peasant is a domesticated animal, the workhorse of a culture, kept in ignorance and trapped by duty. The fact that Kavanagh carefully avoids comparing peasants to *wild* animals brings to light his demarcation between wild and domesticated nature. Wilderness is life, freedom and inspiration, whereas beasts and soil under captivity represent repression.

Kavanagh’s peasant is also outside of history, and in this way the poem moves beyond the simple material correspondence of allegory into the amplification of an ideal unbound by history. Sections IV and V demonstrate the irrelevance of time to Maguire and his ilk.

April, and no one able to calculate

How far is the harvest. They put down

The seeds blindly . . .

Tomorrow is Wednesday—who cares? (IV 1-3; 5)

and the previously-quoted “There is no to-morrow;/ No future but only time stretched for the mowing of the hay/ Or putting an axle in the turf-barrow.” Christ’s coming is perpetually suspended in this endless purgatory:

Somebody is coming over the metal railway bridge

And his hob-nailed boots on the arches sound like a gong

Calling men awake.

But the bridge is too narrow—

The men lift their heads a moment. That was only John,

So they dream on. (V 9-13)

The peasant relates to time only in that it passes in spite of him and acts upon him in his aging and decay. This is dystopian pastoralism: the peasant is not the wellspring of poetry but he is also still not the master of his own destiny. He is a perpetual victim unable to alter his fate.

He gave himself another year,

Something was bound to happen before then—

The circle would break down

And he would curve the new one to his own will . . .

The poor peasant talking to himself in a stable door—

An ignorant peasant deep in dung. (IX 1-4; 9-10)

There is also the matter of the extent to which Kavanagh uses the hopeless, helpless peasant to create a particular aesthetic. If he is not “the pool in which the poet dips,” why does the peasant *as a type* figure in Kavanagh’s poetry at all? If it were his aim to undo the pastoral completely

Maguire would be peculiar and Kavanagh would not have taken such great pains to make him representative in a way that exacerbates rather than rails against primitivism (contrary to Quinn 180). Kavanagh's peasant is no better at undoing the stage Irishman than is Yeats' (or Kavanagh's rhetorical idea of Yeats'), and he is no less guilty of using a stylized type to further his poetic goals. In fact, the speaker asks us to look to this miserable peasant for a kind of inspiration toward a Sermon-on-the-Mount simplicity.

And in the end who shall rest in truth's high peace?

Or whose is the world now, even now?

O let us kneel where the blind ploughman kneels

And learn to live without despairing

In a mud-walled space. (XI 65-9)

Maguire has made a grave (in more ways than one) mistake in failing to marry and submitting to the demands of his Field-Mother-Wife, but the poem offers an alternative that does in fact idealize the peasant; Kavanagh's achievement is in highlighting the peasant's suffering, but he still clings to an ideal that requires the man who knows the soil to fulfill. In Maguire's middle age we get a glimpse of this happy peasant.

One day he saw a daisy and he thought it

Reminded him of his childhood . . .

He saw the sunlight and begrudged no man

His share of what the miserly soil and soul

Gives in a season to a ploughman. (XI 73-4; 82-4)

Here he also gives in to the compulsions of his body: "And he cried for his own loss one late night on the pillow" (XI 85). Pure images of nature, untamed and incidental, spur these moments

for Maguire. And despite the speaker's repeated expressions of the hopelessness of Maguire's situation, he muses that

Maybe [Maguire] will be born again, a bird of an angel's conceit  
To sing the gospel of life  
To a music as flightily tangent  
As a tune on an oboe  
And the serious look of the fields will have changed to the leer of a hobo  
Swaggering celestially home to his three wishes granted. (XIV 54-9)

Maguire could only be reborn as the freest and wildest of animals and of humans, the bird and the vagabond.<sup>27</sup>

Although *The Great Hunger* is Kavanagh's best-known and best-crafted poem, the fullness of his reimagined poetic comes in his other long poem, "Lough Derg." Here, on the ground most fertile for the shifting of cultural and poetic frameworks, the ancient pilgrimage of Lough Derg, Kavanagh confirms and expands upon the themes and arguments of *The Great Hunger*. At Lough Derg the struggles between domestication and freedom, institutionalized Christianity and fertile spirituality, the poetic and spiritual practice of Paul versus that of the

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<sup>27</sup>What is the value, then, of Kavanagh's contribution to the conversation about the place of peasantry in Irish poetry, and what is the relative strength of his actual contribution to his *assumed* contribution? If Revivalism's rhetorical influence was as great or greater from that of its complex and ever-evolving positions, what hope might we have that the complexities of Kavanagh's oeuvre have survived into influence? On the one hand, Ireland's best-regarded contemporary poet, Seamus Heaney, credits Kavanagh for making possible the break with Yeats that was necessary for subsequent poets; on the other, Heaney's own poetry works with the image of the poet Kavanagh creates. These questions deserve more detailed study; hopefully this analysis will act as a launching point.

Christ of the Gospels play out in ways that allow Kavanagh to formulate his agenda for Irish poetry. Lough Derg is, after all, where “All Ireland’s Patricks were present” (line 420). In the end, this intentionality and sense of direction forward is what distinguishes Kavanagh from Devlin and MacGreevy, whose preoccupation with failure and longing for pure expression do not make it all the way to a new style; and from Beckett, whose style was more of a departure from the traditions of Irish poetry than the others, but whose particular stated agenda for Irish poetry was less legible to the development of Irish poetry after it, possibly in part because Kavanagh stayed in Ireland while Beckett wrote in Paris.<sup>28</sup> This is not necessarily to diminish the actual influence of the others on Irish poetry, but to highlight Kavanagh’s force as part of the rhetoric that came to shape later poetry, in addition to its purely (if it could be so) poetic influence. “Lough Derg” also clearly demonstrates the dangers of lumping Kavanagh’s work into the anti-Revivalist camp without acknowledging the complicated ways it both affirms and departs from the Revival aesthetic; it is revisionist, not revolutionary.

In *The Great Hunger* we saw peasants reduced to comparisons with domesticated animals and how this identification diminishes their ability to stand as free, peculiar individuals who live in time. Kavanagh continues his concern with domesticity in “Lough Derg,” expanding it to pertain to the institutionalization of Christianity as it has come to be expressed in Irish culture. He begins, as in *The Great Hunger*, by describing the pilgrims as being “like hens to roost” (44) and echoes the sense of repression in agriculture when he compares the Leitrim man’s face to “a flooded hay-field” (76). But domestication is not merely oppressive; as a process it is violent, literally life-taking. In *The Great Hunger* Maguire unwittingly participates in land-rape:

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<sup>28</sup> Kavanagh was intentionally visible in the literary community, often notoriously, which would have put his readers in more consistent touch with his rather forcefully stated opinions on literature and politics.



The twisting sod rolls over on her back—  
The virgin screams before the irresistible sock.  
No worry on Maguire's mind that day  
Except that he forgot to bring his matches. (III 16-19)

On Lough Derg the domestications are just as perilous. When the speaker carefully peels the beauty of physical love from the monstrous consequences of exercising that love in concert with power in his discussion of the delicate matter of the priest's sexual abuse of a young girl, his language specifically invokes agricultural oppression.

Three times finds all  
The notes of body's madrigal  
'Twas a failing otherwise . . .  
A convent girl knowing  
Nothing of earth sowing. (156-8; 151-2)

The sin to Kavanagh is not in pleasure-taking but in conversion from the purity and freedom that childhood represents (in the lingering 19<sup>th</sup>-century sense) to an adult domestication through sex. Similarly, in the next stanza the red-haired man sees a girl who is "something from the unconverted kingdom" (171) as opposed to the "Holy Biddy/ with a rat-trap on her diddy" (169-70). The "Holy Biddy" is domesticated by convent; the girl is available for domestication through sex. Thus far unprotected by civilization ("The masonry's down" [180]), the red-haired man "saw from the unpeopled country into a town" (183). Similarly, the old Leitrim man's own servility has its origins of sexual control.

I can tell you  
What I am. Servant girls bred my servility:

When I stoop

It is my mother's mother's mother's mother

Each one being called in to spread—

‘Wider with your legs,’ the master of the house said . . .

[I] Show the cowardice of the man whose mothers were whored

By five generations of capitalist and lord. (424-30; 437-8)

Cathleen Ni Houlihan has nary a chance here. She will become either the property of the Church or of a husband; and the language of settlement here makes the situation broadly Irish. When had it a chance to become the bird of Maguire's wishes? Men are victims, too; the pedant professor-like Robert is doomed to miss the freshness of spontaneity in favor of a dry, mathematically predictable world view. “The delicate precise immediacy/ That sees a flower half a foot away/ He could not learn” (274-6).

Domestication is both internally and externally wrought, as the lovely virgin maiden is settled and the old hag, here the nun or “Holy Biddy” is enclosed inside the walls of the Irish Church. Kavanagh's sense of unnatural stricture, though, extends beyond the Church and Ireland in his insistent situating of the poem in time during WWII. “All happened on Lough Derg as it is written/ In June nineteen forty-two/ When the Germans were fighting outside Rostov” (618-20).

Kavanagh rejects a patriotic passion for war, dismissing its meaning as anything but trivial.

When they lived in Time they knew

What men killed each other for—

Was it something different in the spelling

of a useless law? (547-50)

People who do not live in time are people whose individuality, spontaneity, and passion have been enlisted to become part of the masonry of collective organization, a role that asks them to die for something that is already dead: the law.

Kavanagh's alternative to domestication is its opposite, and his articulation of it requires him to redefine Christian, and Irish Christian spirituality. To begin with, though, Kavanagh takes a page out of the Revivalist playbook and allows Ireland's pagan origins, like those St. Patrick (in one version) saw fit to incorporate into a uniquely Irish. Through the poem animist depictions of the sun and moon portray them as living beings, not just as heavenly bodies but as characters with eyes whose Platonic rays literally and figuratively shed light on Lough Derg. In the beginning of the poem love is associated with sunlight. "Love-sunlit is an enchanter in June's hours/ And flowers and light" (8-9). But not everyone sees wilderness as love; "These to shopkeepers and small lawyers/ Are heresies up beauty's sleeve" (9-10). The sun shows up again during one of the most spiritually ecstatic moments of the pilgrimage. "'I renounce the World,' a young woman cried/ Her breasts stood high in the pagan sun" (93-4). At the moment of hers and the other pilgrims' greatest vulnerability the "pagan sun" stands ready to illuminate their ecstasy, but they are trapped in ritual. "They rejected one by one/ The music of Time's choir" (96-7). Later "the Evening Star/ Looked into Purgatory whimsically" (213-14). Nighttime is also illuminated by the playful moon, who "sailed in . . . that he might make/ Queer faces in the stained-glass windows" (250; 251-2) and asks, "why should the sun/ Have all the fun?" (252-3). The biblical association of the evening star with Christ is significant, and in it lies the primary conflict of the poem. As in *The Great Hunger*, "Lough Derg" privileges the untamed physical world and locates the purest form of Christianity within it, contrasting it to the strangled Christianity Lough Derg both represents and resists. Kavanagh's early poetry demonstrates his

sustained preoccupation with the closeness between the natural world and Christ as body. In “March,” he writes,

The trees were in suspense,  
Listening with an intense  
Anxiety for the Word  
That in the Beginning stirred  
The dark-branched Tree  
Of Humanity. (lines 1-6)

In “Lough Derg,” at the moment the penitents are renouncing the world the speaker chooses to emphasize their physicality in the breasts of the girl and the obesity of the lawyer. That Kavanagh is attempting to realign spirituality with sexuality (the breasts) and satiety (obesity) at the very moment the penitents are to renounce them is clear. The pilgrims renounce the world three times, just as Peter denies Christ. Kavanagh does not leave the association between Christ and the physical world in doubt. Although the red-haired man “skimmed the sentiment of every pool of experience” (line 136) (a decidedly un-poetic disengagement), “Christ sometimes bleeds in the museum” (140). This reminds the reader of Kavanagh’s contempt for the preservation of old ways at the expense of a dynamic life. He “came to Lough Derg to please the superstition . . . Yet he alone went out with Jesus fishing” (142; 144). The use of “Jesus” instead of Christ emphasizes the Christ of the gospels as opposed to the later Christ, interpreted by Paul to become emblematic of a religion.

Indeed it is the war<sup>29</sup> between Pauline Christianity and that of the gospels that contains Kavanagh's central argument and reveals his alternative to the famine of Irish culture and spirituality. While it is true that in his essays and public statements of the nonfictional sort were expressly contemptuous of Yeats and his Revivalist project, Kavanagh's real target is Paul. For him the Jesus of the gospels is the origin of true Christian spirituality, while Paul represents the dead, institutionalized spirituality of the Irish Church.

Was that St Paul  
Riding his ass down a lane in Donegal?  
Christ was lately dead,  
Men were afraid  
With a new fear, the fear  
Of death. (312-17)

Not only is Paul incorrect, but his denial of the flesh is blasphemous. The Church is built on Paul, not Christ.

Don't ask for life,' the monk said.

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<sup>29</sup> "Tension" is the conventional term for critics at moments such as these, but Kavanagh's insistence on foregrounding WWII in a poem that has nothing literally to do with it makes 'tension' a weak descriptor for a conflict whose consequences are for Kavanagh a matter of life and death, both literally and spiritually. He writes, "Lough Derg overwhelmed the individual imagination/ And the personal tragedy./ Only God thinks of the dying sparrow/ In the middle of a war." Two stanzas later, after a contemplation of "The Communion of Saints" as "a Communion of individuals," Kavanagh makes his first explicit reference to WWII. These sentiments regarding the individual life as more important than historical event are echoed in the later poem "Beyond the Headlines," in which the poet "knew that [the wings of geese] would outwear the wings of war,/ And a man's simple thoughts outlive the day's loud lying."

‘If you meet her  
Be easy with your affection;  
She’s a traitor  
To those who love too much.’ (370-4)

The true God, the one Kavanagh pleads with Irish Christians to accept, is deeply invested in the actual, individual lives of people. This is, incidentally, also Kavanagh’s notion of poetry as rooted in the local, the parochial, and the particular.

The ex-monk, farmer and the girl  
Melted in the crowd  
Where only God, the poet,  
Followed with interest till he found  
Their secret, and constructed from  
The chaos of its fire  
A reasonable document. (341-8)

An earlier poem, “Christmas, 1939,” makes explicit the relationship between Kavanagh’s conception of an ideal poetic and the person of Christ. Addressing Christ he writes, “All that is poet in me/ is the dream I dreamed of your Childhood/ And the dream You dreamed of me” (lines 2-4). What Kavanagh is calling for in “Lough Derg” and throughout his work is something that is actually originary in both Catholicism and Protestantism but is quickly institutionalized and sublimated in both. The path to God is through the self, through an embrace of the physical self and its place within creation, not its denial. The Church is the ultimate form of domestication against ‘natural’ Christian spirituality. Paul is the author of theology; Christ is author of faith. True to the gospels, denial of the flesh, as Peter’s denial of Christ in his most physically

vulnerable moment, is sin. What Kavanagh seeks, ultimately, is a materialist, poetic spirituality, and he wants it for Ireland; without it will come what he calls in *The Great Hunger*, the “apocalypse of clay” (XIV line 76).

Kavanagh’s speaker in “Lough Derg” is less pessimistic than the speaker of *The Great Hunger*. In the first place he conceives of Lough Derg as a neutral space capable of holding, expressing, and promoting a number of different spiritual and cultural agendas, and it is in places such as these that he sees the greatest potential for renewal. Lough Derg’s over-determined ambiguity is fertile ground for what Kavanagh calls “half-pilgrims” (line 35), and it is in their ambiguity that new growth will occur. The representative half-pilgrim of “Lough Derg” is suspended (he stands in the poem literally between houses and the lake) between nature (which stands for true spirituality and poetry) and civilization (domestication, the Church). Towards the beginning of the poem it is the half-pilgrim who notices the flaw in the statue of St Patrick. The shamrock in his hand is missing, and the onlooker attributes it not to weather or age but to a mistake on the artist’s part. The half-pilgrim is doubtful, even about poetry—he is the red-haired man who “skimmed the sentiment of every pool of experience/ And talked heresy lightly from distances” (136-7) essentially unable to commit to poetry—and less sure about things than the speaker whose romantic leanings would prescribe a new poetic to cure Ireland’s cultural ills. The loss of the shamrock is a loss of Irishness, and the poet is to blame. Could it be that Revivalists and Young Irelanders merely pasted the shamrock on, but that its adherence was fleeting? The half-pilgrim is wary. This is the same man—the red-haired one—whose conflicted thoughts about Aggie Meehan opens up the ground for the peeling away of abstinence from spirituality.

Ultimately, the poem is optimistic about the possibilities Lough Derg holds in spite of its potential for further oppression. The pilgrims will be changed by Lough Derg, achieving a freedom from mundanity into the ecstasy of God/nature that will persist after they return home.

When he will walk again in Muckno Street

He'll hear from the kitchens of fair-day eating houses

In the after-bargain carouses

News from a country beyond the range of birds. (70-3)

In other words, he will learn from the shafts of light and spontaneously-growing flowers of Lough Derg to find freedom and spirituality not just in the wildness of nature but in the wildness of human nature.

Both Devlin and Kavanagh wrote Lough Derg poems at around the same time which differ significantly in style and tone. Devlin's is lofty, high-minded, regularly versed, and nostalgically archaic in language. His characters are mere types without individuation, and the poet remains at a distance from them until the very end. Kavanagh's poem, at almost three times the length of Devlin's, is markedly more vernacular and less condensed. He names and identifies with his characters, and while still marked by social class, they have rich inner lives and widely varying relationships with Lough Derg. Both poets, however, write Lough Derg poems in response to world war and home angst. A sense of absence and longing motivates Devlin and Kavanagh to posit alternatives to the sort of thinking that leads to political conflict and cultural famine.

Devlin's wish, as he expresses it across his entire oeuvre,<sup>30</sup> is to (impossibly) return to a sort of classical aesthetic, which the poem's language, particularly in its plethora of classical

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<sup>30</sup> See this dissertation's chapter on Devlin for a full discussion of his favoring of a classical aesthetic.



continental allusions, amply demonstrates. Although classicism is not Kavanagh's priority—least of all in this poem, whose heroes are Patrick and Lough Derg's caretaker, John Flood—both he and Devlin long for a more dynamic, passionate cultural aesthetic, one that embraces the body instead of denying it and privileges imagination over obligation. Devlin's poem laments that "dearth puffed positive in the stance of duty/ With which these pilgrims would propitiate/ Their fears;" and a glance at stained glass reminds him of a time when "Christ the Centaur, in two natures whole,/ With fable and proverb joinered body and soul." Like Kavanagh, Devlin weds the privileging of the corporeal body with Christ's body in an attempt to offer an aesthetic that, if not specifically Christian in terms of the institution of the Irish Church, is nevertheless imbued with a sense of literally experienced belief. For Kavanagh, there is the possibility of 'unconverting' Irish Christianity:

But something from the unconverted kingdom,  
The beauty that has turned  
Convention into forests  
Where Adam wanders deranged with half a memory. (170-3)

This turning away from cultural famine toward a rich, imaginative engagement with life has relevance beyond Ireland, as both poets' explicit references to WWII attest. Both poets are concerned with the destruction of community war exacts and articulate its remedy as an attempt toward wholeness, no matter how impossible to achieve.<sup>31</sup> For Devlin it is more specifically about belief ("With mullioned Europe shattered, this Northwest,/ Rude-sainted island would pray it whole again"), but for both it comes down to passionate engagement as opposed to passivity,

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<sup>31</sup> In Devlin's poem the impossibility of true wholeness is explicit. "Not all/ The men of God nor the priests of mankind/ Can mend or explain the good and broke,/ not one Generous with love prove communion."

which is assisted by institutionalization. In Devlin's poem, "Ours, passive, for man's gradual wisdom take/ Firefly instinct dreamed out into law;/ The prophets' jeweled kingdom down at hell/ Fires no Augustine here. Inert, they kneel." Kavanagh's poem calls for a recognition of actual, particular, common bodies, the "unwritten spaces between the lines" as opposed to "ideas in the contemplative cloister." His answer is love.

A man throws himself prostrate

And God lies down beside him like a woman

Consoling the hysteria of her lover

That sighs his passion emptily; 'The next time, love, you shall faint in me.'<sup>32</sup>

(365-9)

God as lover is not a new trope but it is foreign to a culture of institutionally mediated belief, as Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, and Kavanagh suggests, the rest of Europe, demonstrates.

Devlin's and Kavanagh's disdain for institution is specifically related to its facilitation of passivity. In no time was lack of engagement more relevant than Ireland in World War II, and the poets were not alone in their response. Clair Wills carefully documents Irish writers' concern with Irish neutrality in the war, citing extensive documentary about WWII, which she has labeled a "wartime literary renaissance" (Wills 13). Contrary to the general critical opinion that the arts reflected a more generic cultural famine of ideas and energy, Wills argues that "the war proved a turning point for . . . a self-confident modern Irish writing in English. The grumbles about intellectual stagnation were, paradoxically, evidence of the energy and dynamism which

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<sup>32</sup> In the earlier poem, "Pilgrims," though they come to seek life, knowledge, and vision, what the pilgrims find is "love, love, love . . . / Love that is Christ green walking from the summer headlands/ To His scarecrow cross in the turnip-ground."

was resisting that stagnation” (Wills 13) and discusses a variety of creative material (Sean O’Faolain, Frank O’Connor, Mary Lavin, James Joyce and Louis MacNeice) as support. Kavanagh’s Lough Derg poem, which was written after his own visit to the island for the purposes of publishing an essay about it, documents the pilgrims’ interest in the war, despite their physical distance from it. “Then there was war, the slang, the contemporary touch/ The ideologies of the daily papers” (lines 356-7). Devlin and Kavanagh do not necessarily equate political neutrality with cultural passivity, and indeed Wills’ book offers ample evidence for the difference. Neither poem specifically addresses political neutrality, suggesting instead that passivity instead overwhelms something as trivial as a question over political engagement. What will save Ireland, and Europe, for both Devlin and Kavanagh is a passionate, imaginative engagement with life unmediated by cultural institutions, and attentive to individual experience and imbued with a sense of belief. Steven Matthews traces this desire for a return to belief—pagan or otherwise—in Yeats (Matthews 4), whose interest in Celtic pagan religious practice is well known.

Kavanagh’s other main concern through the duration of his poetry through mid-century was the tension between the longing for a sense of community—indeed, the necessity of community as a humanizing and stabilizing force—and the inevitable, but also necessary, sense of separation a poet experiences.<sup>33</sup> Kavanagh’s early poetry frequently laments his alienation

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<sup>33</sup> See Brendan Kennelly’s essay, “Patrick Kavanagh” for general comments on Kavanagh’s sense of detachment and never belonging; Gregory Schimer’s writing on Kavanagh in *Out of What Began: A History of Irish Poetry in English*, p. 308; and Peggy O’Brien’s comments on the “communal value of the Church” (130) in *Writing Lough Derg*.

from those around him. In “Inniskeen Road: July Evening,” while everyone else is at the dance, the poet has the road to himself.

I have what every poet hates in spite  
Of all the solemn talk of contemplation  
. . . A road, a mile of kingdom, I am king  
Of banks and stones and every blooming thing. (lines 9-10; 13-4)

Similarly, in “April Dusk,” he describes observing

An unmusical ploughboy whistles down the lane,  
Not worried at all about the fate of Europe,  
While I sit here feeling the subtle pain  
That every silenced poet has endured. (lines 14-17)

Here he alludes to the general situation of the poet in Ireland at the time, where at least at this juncture in his career, there were few opportunities for expression beyond the echoes of his own walls. Indeed Kavanagh laments his calling as a poet, as “The Irony of It” complains:

It was not right  
That my mind should have echoed life’s overtones,  
That I should have seen a flower  
Petalled in mighty power. (lines 15-18)

Nevertheless, in “Snail,” the poet as self retreats from the reader intentionally.

You are lost.  
You can merely chase the silver I have let  
Fall from my purse  
you follow silver

And not follow me. (lines 13-17)

But Kavanagh the poet also feels a sense of tenderness for the community in which he came up as ploughman and poet and maintains committed to its life-giving powers. In the poetry community and place are often one and the same. In “Monaghan Hills,” the poet’s very identity is that of the place that bore him. “O Monaghan hills, when is writ your story,/ A carbon-copy will unfold my being” (lines 18-19). In “Shancoduff” the poet attributes his commitment to a parochial poetic scope to the “incurious” (line 4) hills themselves; they are his Alps, he says, barren though they are (8). “Christmas Eve Remembered” expresses the poet’s feelings of connection to his parishfolk through the person of Christ, despite the feelings of alienation he more often experiences, though even here the access is through memory. “And memory you have me spared/ A light to follow them/ Who go to Bethlehem” (28-30).

Kavanagh’s longest work before *The Great Hunger* and “Lough Derg” was an unfinished piece, “Why Sorrow?,” a poem that somewhat less successfully explores the priorities of the later and more fully developed poems. In “Why Sorrow?” Father Mat is a priestly precursor to Macguire; he is married to the Church rather than the fields, and comes to middle-age with resignation and premature spiritual death. Father Mat also experiences the split identity of the poet (of the people but apart from them) in his office as priest. Although he is a man of the people and of the land that grew him

out of this sour soil [Father Mat’s earthly father] squeezed

The answer to his wife’s wishes;

In steely grass and green rushes

Was woven the vestments of a priest (lines 69-72)

he is alienated from them both by his Church office and his earthly priesthood. He feels the pull of the second before the first, as the poem describes his early enrapturement with natural beauty and human life simply lived and sees in them a spiritual vitality.

But through the dusk window-panes  
Looking out where ducks were coming gabbling in  
From the frog-croaking bogs at Corofin,  
A calf sucking the edge of a tub,  
The Evening Star musing in the East,  
Behind the house the giggle of girls.  
He was a priest  
Already. (84-91)

As a child Father Mat lives in in-between spaces, literally a stretch of grass between a road and a railway, and the hedges he walks through along the road (as opposed to on the road where common folk travel). A simple clothesline facilitates spiritual contemplation. “He looked at it through fingers crossed to riddle/ In evening sunlight miracles for men” (105-6). The speaker describes Father Mat performing his priestly duties while dreaming of more lively matters taking place outside of the Church. As Father Mat listens to a confession he regards the process as one of a burning up and putting away of “every stalk/ that grew green in the heart” (215-16). For the Church’s sake, “All poetry in nature or book/ Must be outcast this night” (229-30). As he moves into an adult priesthood he continues to find vital spirituality in what precedes the Church, whether longing for a pagan imagination

Now the priest’s pride  
Was a Roman poet’s hearing of the Crucified:

Apollo's unbaptized pagan who can show  
To simple eyes what Christians never know—  
Was it the unspeakable beauty of hell? (4-8)

or contemplating the world before Christianity came along to tame it. In the second stanza Father Mat imagines

A suddenness of green and light,  
And the walls of mud that were spun to spheres  
Within the orbit of the road-roller's wheels;  
All that was true before the piteous death of the Cross.  
No earth-love was transfigured on that Hill. (12-16)

And later the speaker sounds a warning to Father Mat, who can still recognize that “the trees that were before the Cross was sawn/ Were worthy to be worshipped” (163-4) and urges him to “Come draw your wages/ In evening silver, in pure gold at dawn”<sup>34</sup> (164-5).

But Father Mat cannot sustain the revelatory visions of the loveliness of life and nature and continue to serve the Church in the way his superiors expect him to. At first he hides his thoughts from his curate, Father Ned, but when faced with praise rather than judgment at the words of the Bishop, Father Mat succumbs to mounting pressure to abdicate his poetic spirit. As the Bishop continues the Mass Father Mat thinks

Of his own Confirmation Day . . .  
when he first found in clay  
The secret of a different Deity written . . .

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<sup>34</sup> Another poem entitled “Father Mat” appears in this period, a shorter version of “Why Sorrow?” In it the poet praises the “unbaptized beauty” of “ancient Ireland” and “the smell from the ditches that were not Christian.”

Before the sun went down into Drumcatton. (373; 374-6, second ellipsis in original)

Pride leads his abrupt but anticlimactic transition from priest of earth and Church to priest of Church merely in words that echo the Lough Derg's penitents' denial of the world. "So one dull day he knelt and struck his breast/ And denied the sun and the earth. And Jesus Christ/ Turned him round in his path" (382-4). Father Mat confesses his sinfully poetic thoughts to Father Ned, moving them from imagination into extinction, and with it gives up his vocational distance from his parishioners.

Now he was with his people, one of them.

What they saw, he saw too,

And nothing more; what they looked at,

and what to them was true, was true

For him. (443-7)

Peggy O'Brien locates Father Mat's change of heart in empathy rather than pride and the need to be truly one with the people he serves, a desire Kavanagh, to O'Brien, would have well understood (O'Brien 140). The poem then describes how a house full of sexually lascivious women now no longer speaks of the fullness of life to Father Mat. "Their screams were larks by day and nightingales by night" (398); "But this that was once a miracle is now/ To Father Mat the abominable symbol of/ The Golden Calf" (422-24). Appropriately he travels to Lough Derg, a place of "life that was not coming in" (472). There he sees, in an image we will see again in "Lough Derg," a young man whose "back was to the sun though he was praying/ For what the sun has thrown to fools all time" (475-6). It may as well be Father Mat, though the speaker suggests that the priest knows what he has done.



Curiously, Christ is not at all the symbol in “Why Sorrow?” that he is in both “Lough Derg” and *The Great Hunger*. He instead stands for the Church and institutionalization; the Virgin Mary is instead the wellspring of unfettered spirituality. Father Mat’s adolescence is marked by an intense physical and spiritual attraction to Mary, who was far from the staid, pious, and chaste figure of the modern Church and more like the Mary of the ecstatic medieval mystics. “She was every girl he knew,/ Nimble-footed, daring too” (126-7). This Mary is not at all a virgin, but not because she is impure. A girl that reminds him of Mary comes to Father Mat to confession to reveal her sexual abuse at the hands of a piano teacher. Reestablishing her worth as a living thing that has *not* been ruined by the encounter Father Mat tells her, “My daughter you are the mystery in the piano’s tune” (248). And indeed it is in her brokenness—not in her impurity—that Father Mat sees spiritual vitality. “And through her broken maidenhood/ He saw the womb of poetry” (251-2). Kavanagh here again establishes literal sexuality as the partner of spiritual and poetic life.

In contrast, Christ guards the gate between Father Mat and any chance of joy.

Christ was always

Like an old farmer guarding it

From neighboring trespass.

He was a grey, stooped old man of Cavan,

Christ herding a ragged cow in a patch of dry grass. (142-5)

In this poem Mary rather than Christ is synonymous with the vital body. Christ, on the other hand, does not belong to the world of poetry. “O the wild, fearful happiness of the poet/ Is almost too great a load for Christ’s shoulders” (233-4). Father Mat wants to follow Mary, who tempts him through a gorgeous rhododendron, but his religious tradition, or at least that one that Father

Ned enforces, demands that he follow “Jesus, Jesus,/ The Defeated One” (263-5) who offers nothing to the Christian but unquenched desire. Why would Kavanagh, whose poetic is at least repetitive if not consistent in stance, turn to Christ in *The Great Hunger* and leave the easily sexualized Mary behind in “Why Sorrow?”? Certainly the figure of Mary would have offered the heterosexual Maguire some degree of imaginative relief from celibacy, as she did Father Mat. Women in *The Great Hunger* are bitter and sexless, where in “Why Sorrow?” they are the embodiment of life.

In the poetry of the late 1940’s and 1950’s, Kavanagh makes more explicit reference to the idea of cultural famine brought on by the domesticating effects of Church and government as peculiarly Irish, and is straightforward about poetry’s ongoing role in revitalization. In “Pegasus,” where the speaker attempts to sell his soul to the Church, the State, the merchants, and finally to the “tinkers,” Kavanagh reaffirms the principle that institutional domestication, particularly that which is caught up in the market, is the enemy to vitality. As soon as the speaker gives up and lets the soul, who here is allegorized as a horse, go free, it sprouts wings on which the speaker “may ride him/ Every land my imagination knew” (lines 49-50). Instead, in a few unpolished and rather didactic poems Kavanagh blasts Ireland for having forgotten to flourish. In “Memory of Brother Michael,” the speaker compares Ireland’s “always evening” (line 1) and “always autumn” (6) to England’s grand exploits of the same period and blames it on Ireland’s fixation on the dead past. “We sailed in puddles of the past/ Chasing the ghost of Brendan’s mast” (9-10). Similarly, “The Wake of the Books,” a sort of hybrid poem/play, dismisses the excuse of censorship for Ireland’s cultural woes and attributes it instead to lack of conviction, weak criticism, and an abdication of the better bits of romanticism. Frank O’Connor in Kavanagh’s mini-play is a Hamlet-figure who confesses his cultural sin:

The most immoral place of all

Is the middle of the road.

Neutrality

Was our destruction. (162-5)

In “The Paddidad,” whose subtitle is “or, the The Devil as a Patron of Irish Letters,” Kavanagh depicts the devil as Mediocrity—the sexless novels he approves of are more sinful than the ones full of sex—and places him in charge of the current state of Irish poetry. “Paddy Conscience,” on the other hand, who the poet identifies variously as Yeats, Joyce, and O’Casey is committed to poetry grounded in place (“‘I’m a Clareman more than Mist’” Paddy Conscience insists [line 96]) and is therefore mocked and thrown out. That is, of course, until Paddy Conscience dies, the occasion upon which his persona is ripe for empty memorialization.

All the Paddies rise and hurry

Home to write the inside story

Of their friendship for the late

Genius who was surely great. (163-6)

The later poem “Who Killed James Joyce?” makes the case for Ireland’s mistreatment of its poets more succinctly, and it is again a matter of domestication.

Who killed James Joyce?

I, said the commentator,

I killed James Joyce

For my graduation.

What weapon was used

To slay the mighty Ulysses?

The weapon that was used

Was a Harvard thesis. (lines 1-8)

In a less careful parsing of rural domestication and the free delights of country life, as we saw in *The Great Hunger*, Kavanagh in this period becomes more and more nostalgic for the poetic possibilities of peasant life. "Temptation in Harvest" documents his pangs of regret at leaving the fecund, sexual countryside, where "amoral Autumn gives her soul away/ And every maidenhead without a fight" in exchange for "five years of pavements" (lines 17-18; 21).

Although he has left the fields that fettered Macguire Kavanagh's speaker finds that they cannot be got around. "Could I go/ Over the field to the City of the Kings/ Where art, music, letters are the real things?/ The stones of the street, the sheds, hedges cried, No" (57-60). Gone is sense we saw in *The Great Hunger* the field can be every bit as binding as urban institutions; in nostalgia Kavanagh appears to have glossed over that earlier revelation. In the 1950's the poet does return to his native grounds, at least in the poetry (see "Auditors In," "Innocence," "The Defeated," and "Kerr's Ass"), and finds the experience confirms his nostalgia. Although is careful not to dismiss the quality and importance of Joyce's work, he does claim in "The Defeated" that O'Casey has not written anything worth reading since the man left Ireland, and has in general a poor opinion of exile. Even if Kavanagh had left Ireland, as so many other writers did, the poet in this period believes that Ireland would never have left him. In "Ante-Natal Dream,"

A clump of nettles cried:

We'll saturate your pride

Till you are oozing with

The richness of our myth.

For we are all you'll know

No matter where you go. (lines 17-22)

Kavanagh almost never ventures into urban spaces in his poetry despite his long-time residence in cities, but when he does, in “Jungle,” its contrast to his ideal of rurality is plain. Here is not the wildness of beauty but an unholy, barbaric, frightening foreign wildness which is opposed to Reason, which reinforces the problematic nature of Kavanagh’s idealization of peasantry, particularly as it conforms to the conventional division between the authentic Irish rural and the morally and culturally bankrupt Irish city.

But for all his bitterness and cynicism about the sorry state of Irish letters Kavanagh’s poetry contains that which the poetry of Devlin, MacGreevy, Beckett and Clarke does not: hope. Kavanagh’s fervent belief, particularly in the post-WWII poetry, is that poetry will survive, even flourish, as long as there is a rich and fertile life for the poet to mine. The poet in “The Wake of the Books” unwittingly predicting what amounts to a second revival of Irish literature in the 1960’s and 1970’s,

I feel as I look that we are waiting for  
a new and surprising world that is coming round the turn,  
The first years of Christendom. There’s the same air  
And the same strange hope exciting a love-sick world. (226-9)

This hope the poet attributes to the fact that

men will always be moved to happiness  
By the sun rising or the sun setting or the brown ivy . . .  
The song will continue  
And the children of the gods whose hearts are humble  
Will hear, will hear. (345-6; 357-9)

Kavanagh's hope comes mainly from his view of the poet as essentially undomesticated and uninstitutionalized. Though the poet's persona may take on the form of caricature for any number of political and social ends, his poet spirit is beyond the reach of appropriation, as in "A Wreath for Tom Moore's Statue," where "in his own city he lives before/ The clay earth was made, an Adam never born,/ His light unprisoned in a dinner-hour" (lines 40-42). In "The Paddidad" the devil Mediocrity must keep on his toes because

Already he can see another  
Conscience coming on to bother  
Ireland with muck and anger,  
Ready again to die of hunger,  
Condemnatory and uncivil—. (lines 181-5)

In its attempt to privilege a sense of place, however, Kavanagh's poetry sometimes slips from nostalgia into another form of Irish myth-making he would have thought well to avoid. Just as his depiction of the peasant as holder of truth and meaning, despite his public intentions not to make him so, feeds into long-standing ethnic prejudices, so too does his occasional depiction of Ireland—more specifically, the rural Ireland of peasant work—as refuge from the conflicts of the rest of the world. This emphasis on refuge is at odds with his disdain for passivity and lack of engagement and creeps too close to solipsism. In "October 1943," a specific reference to WWII, the poet relishes the rain "on potato pits thatched, on the turf clamps home/ On the roofs of the byre where the cows are bedded!" (lines 3-4) and almost sighs as he finds it a "corner of peace in this world of trouble" (8). And in "Peace," he laments his exile from country life where "peace is still hawking/ His coloured combs and scarves and beads of horn" (lines 8-9) and asks, "out of that childhood country what fools climb/ To fight with tyrants Love and Life and Time?" (14-

15). Kavanagh wants to have it both ways: a poetic that is based on connected to a real Ireland in real time, but with a sense of nostalgia that rebuffs its particularity and moves into type.

What separates Kavanagh's work from that of the modernists is that he is perfectly comfortable not dealing with the rest of the world; like Yeats, Kavanagh wished to nurture and perpetuate an aesthetic practice rooted in the actual soil of Ireland. He felt contempt for those artists who left even when he could recognize the quality of their poetry. Staying in Ireland meant, however, that Kavanagh's poetry would more closely follow a rurally-based, romantic, pastoral tradition instead of the modernist leanings of the exiled poets and writers. The presence of both conservative—though not reactionary—and progressive—in terms of responsiveness to foreign influence—poetics is that the poetry of mid-twentieth century Ireland offered a complexity of influence to later poets; in later decades Ireland would produce both Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson, both Nuala ní Dhomhnaill and Maeve McGuckian.

Yeats's vision of a truly national literature became in this period far more pluralistic than perhaps he could have imagined, a phenomenon appropriate to an Ireland that offered so many different ways of being Irish and being Irish in the world. What connects all of these poetic approaches, including Yeats', is that they are all responses to a sense of real and worsening cultural famine, and whether each poet chooses to stay at home and find life within or seek it abroad, or both, all of them could not rely upon a comfortably established tradition that responded well to the circumstances of the historical moment.

## FLOWERED STONE: THE POETRY OF AUSTIN CLARKE

Although responses to the conditions of life and poetry-making in mid-twentieth-century Ireland vary widely from poet to poet (and in Clarke's case, collection to collection) the poetry of Austin Clarke in the 1930s comes closest to that of Patrick Kavanagh. His stylistic approach differs considerably from Kavanagh's; it is less vernacular, more engaged with traditions of Gaelic-language poetry, more disciplined in form, and less transparently rhetorical, particularly in Clarke's earlier poetry. But his poetry, as Kavanagh's, is in its subject matter, tone, and focus, rigorously Irish. Clarke did not remain in Ireland as did Kavanagh—he was forced to relocate to London for a decade in order to support his family—but like Joyce, his poetry never emigrated. In this sense Clarke is more an inheritor of the Revival than any other Irish poet of the mid-twentieth-century, particularly in his use of Irish historical material (though from later periods than that of the Revival writers) and poetic devices from Gaelic bardic poetry. Like Kavanagh, Clarke's public protestations against the excesses and decadence of the Revival trivialize the extent to which his poetry reworked the Revival's concerns to accomplish, in this writer's opinion, what Yeats<sup>35</sup> had in mind when he envisioned a national poetry. The poetry reflects, as

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<sup>35</sup> Yeats, however, was apparently not of the same opinion; he pointedly excluded Clarke from his (year) Oxford Book of Irish Verse, for which Clarke reputedly never forgave him.



Robert F. Garratt argues, Clarke's "desire to be a thoroughly and distinctively Irish poet" (103) and Gregory Schirmer concurs (2). Robert Welch goes further when he asserts that Clarke's poetry

binds modern Irish verse in English to the Gaelic tradition with a thoroughness, completeness and freedom which Hyde, for all his scholarship and sweetness, and Yeats, for all his vast strength and beauty, did not quite do. He has done more than fill a gap; he has restored a voice and given it the substantiality of flowered stone. (51)

Clarke, like the other poets of his day, ensured the continuation of Irish poetry, in all of its diversity and contradiction, during a time in Irish history that offered the most strenuous barriers to its survival. Clarke's takes seriously the Revivalist task of lending continuity between past and present Irish literature while at the same time shaping style and theme to address the cultural realities of his own era. Like Kavanagh, Devlin, and Salkeld, Clarke ponders the possibilities and limitations inherent in different forms of spirituality. For Clarke, a turning away from dogma toward free thought is only the beginning; he will redefine "thought" as a remedy to stagnation but as distinct from reason.

Having had all of his novels censored in Ireland, and having bitterly acknowledged the difficulty of making a living in Ireland as a poet, Clarke keenly felt the strictures and oppressions of Ireland in mid-century, and like his contemporaries, a good deal of his poetry from this period is directed toward these confines. While *Night and Morning* (1938) spells out his disenchantment with the Church's oppressions more specifically and directly, *Pilgrimage* (1929) richly engages—and celebrates—notions of cultural richness and freedom. Both collections assert and reassert the necessity for—and inevitability of—personal and cultural freedom. While the

struggle between reason and faith, as many scholars have read it, is a concern of *Night and Morning*, its larger function is to continue the assertion of *Pilgrimage* that freedom is essential to life—both individually and culturally—and that the costs of that freedom (loss of home, community, and parish) are entirely too high. Like Kavanagh, Clarke would love nothing more than to maintain a parish-based culture, but is anguished that in its current form the parish offers little more than spiritual repression.

In nearly every poem in *Pilgrimage* the sea plays a central role in the plot or in the movement of characters and of cultural influence. The sea brings pilgrims to Clonmacnoise in the title poem; it brings Nial to Gormlai in “The Confession of Queen Gormlai;” brings Deirdre back to Ireland in “The Cardplayer;” takes the young woman from place to place in “The Young Woman of Beare;” brings Spanish ships to the shore in “South-Westerly Gale;” and brings the Church in the form of a woman in “The Marriage Night.” In the other poems—excepting “The Scholar,” which mentions a river—the sea is always present as part of their settings. “Celibacy” takes place on an island, “The Planter’s Daughter” takes place “When night stirred at sea” (line 1); and “Aisling” begins

At morning from the coldness of Mount Brandon,  
The sail is blowing half-way to the light;  
And islands are so small, a man may carry  
Their yellow crop in one cart at low tide. (1-4)

These first lines also demonstrate Clarke’s use of wind as inextricably wedded to the sea and providing the energy for its movement. In all of the poems for which wind and water provide transport, their presence also signals the arrival of a foreign or subversive element which initiates both positive and negative change, challenging the notion of freedom as an uncomplicated

alternative to stricture. In “The Marriage Night,” a woman who “. . . brought/ a blessing from the Pope” sails in from Spain, where a good number of Irish clergy studied in the early days of Irish Christianity, is both a harbinger of joy—

Such light was on her cheekbone

And chin—who would not praise

In holy courts of Europe

The wonder of her days? (13-16)

—and of conquest:

But in deceit of smoke

And fire, the spoilers came:

Tower and unmortar’d wall broke

Rich flight to street and gate. (33-36)

The joy of the marriage night gives way to the morning, which finds lying “. . . by her side/ Those heretics” (39-40). In “Southwesterly Gale,” which directly precedes “The Marriage Night,” natives holed up in their houses to keep from the wind find that it will break their cultural enclosures in the form of a ship “from Portugal or Spain” (30). Clarke’s language sharply contrasts the wildness of the wind with the peace and safety of the indoors. In other places in Clarke’s poetry, wind and water signify freedom; the instability of both terms reflects the complexity of Clarke’s explorations into notions of freedom. Wind and water have the potential in all of his poems to bring new life, threats to safety and security, and usually a combination of the two. The “clang of bar and spike/ Rolling the timbered wine” (9-10) sounds against the “fire or lighted table” (6). When the weather clears the Claremen find the strange ship whose description invokes a sense of both foreboding and promise. Though it is imposing (“For

they had seen a tall ship/ Stand to the sun in flame/ Between the cloud and wave” [25-27]), it also docks as the weather is clearing, suggesting a peaceful entrance; and as she is “trimming her golden wicks,” there remains the possibility that the ship brings the potential for enlightenment as well. Although the feminizing of ships is commonplace, Clarke’s insistence on the feminine pronoun (“she” instead of “the ships,” “ships” would have created a nice assonance with “wicks” in the line above) brings to mind the young woman of Beare in the poem just before it.

The woman in “The Young Woman of Beare,” who travels from somewhere in the south to Ireland, and then to various ports therein, visits both pleasure and corruption on the parishioners in each location. Against the enclosed nature of religious life the young woman offers freedom in the form actual sexual trysts and in the fantasies she provokes through her appearance and reputation. Unlike the men she tempts and the woman who scorn her, who to escape the wrath of the church must “. . . kneel/ The longer at confession” (48-49) and “. . . keep from the dance-hall/ And dark side of the road” (90-91) the young woman of Beare is free to satisfy her fleshly desires whenever she sees fit. Indeed, unlike the churchgoers she is “. . . only roused/ By horsemen of de Burgo/ That gallop to my house” (8-10). But Clarke’s decision to make the young woman the speaker of the poem coupled with his rich and gorgeously erotic descriptions of her lovemaking celebrate rather than condemn her actions.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See John Goodby’s essay “ ‘The Prouder Counsel of Her Throat:’ Towards a Feminist Reading of Austin Clarke” for a detailed examination of the ways Clarke’s use of the feminine voice, imagery, and density of language undermine the masculinity of the Irish poetic. Goodby also sees Clarke’s frequent use of sea imagery as advancing a specifically feminist kind of freedom. “. . . that pulsion just below the threshold of meaning which enters and disrupts the symbolic order of language, feels its constraints but nevertheless manages to register something of its independence” (335).

See! See, as from a lathe  
My polished body turning!  
He bares me below the waist  
And now blue clothes uncurl  
Upon white haunch. I let  
The last bright stitch fall down  
For him as I lean back,  
Straining with longer arms  
Above my head to snap  
The silver knots of sleep. (70-80)

The young woman proudly invites both the man—who is any man, and not a specific figure, unlike Gormlai’s lovers—and the reader look at her body, and to look at it lustfully, allowing both her clothes and arms to bare her. In the first section of the poem, Clarke reverses the imagery of light and darkness, contrasting the young woman’s “bright temptation” (30) and “polished body” (71) to the shadows through which churchgoers hurry to pray (lines 1-3) (Schirmer 36; Timson 63-64). As Maurice Harmon has mentioned, Clarke’s contrast of the blue clothing and “white haunch” create “a perverse Madonna of the bed” (Harmon 71), which resonates well with Clarke’s welding of sensuality and spirituality in other poems in this collection, though Clarke’s tone suggests a sense of delight in the perverseness of welding. In the poem’s second section light and darkness return to their conventional connotations; now she is “the dark temptation/ Men know” against the “shining orders/ Of clergy [that] have condemned me” (200-3). Whereas the first section was unashamedly celebratory, this one communicates what sounds like remorse on the young woman’s part.

Then, to a sound of bracelets,  
I look down and my locks  
Are curtailed on a nape  
That leads men into wrong. (156-9)

But, despite this acknowledgement and the exhortation to other young women not to follow her into her “common ways” (93) in lines 90-100 and 104-7, the young woman of Beare continues to pursue the fulfillment of her fleshly desires. These brief moments of remorse and warning do not amount to confession; *her* freedom—not her lovers’—is more valuable to her than the state of her eternal soul and worth risking her physical safety in a cultural that condemns her actions. After she is caught in the arms of a man at daylight she remembers that “My fear was less than joy/ To gallop from the tide” (130-1). As she describes the flight of her and her lover with breathless ecstasy, the landscape affirms her choices:

The green land by Lough Corrib  
Spoke softly and all day  
We followed through a forest  
The wet heel of the axe,  
Where sunlight had been trestled  
In clearing and in gap. (134-40)

Just as sunlight is “trestled,” the young woman’s freedom is curtailed by social convention. In order to live her life the way she chooses she must constantly be on the move. In this context the young woman’s apparent remorse becomes more a statement of the cost of freedom, which is a loss of home, community, and permanency, than genuine regret for herself. These are not confessions, except in their admission that she has endangered the souls of others. Even her

warnings to other women to “keep from the dance-hall” (90) and to “be modest in your clothes” (151) read more like statements of concern for fellow women than arguments against her own lifestyle, which she continues to describe in enticing terms up to the closing lines of the poem. Taken in its entirety, the poem’s condemnation comes down not on the young woman’s own actions but in the rootless life she must lead in order to maintain her freedom. It is possible to live a life according to one’s own rules and desires, but the cost is great; and the blame lies with those who would exact that cost. Of course the young woman is also quick to point out the cost of a life lived within the walls she chooses to evade, between enforced silence (“The men and women murmur” [213]) and the restraints of marriage, for which “they might pinch and save/ Themselves in lawful pleasure” (88-89).

To Clarke it is a no-win proposition: give up the safety of the community for freedom or give up freedom for the safety of community, which was particularly potent coming from the perspective (insomuch as a male poet can speak for women) of the feminine in Irish culture, whose contradictory representations (the *cailin*, or fresh young woman and hag, or bitter old one) make it a rich source of exploration into the contradictions of freedom and confinement. Like Kavanagh Clarke values uninhibited sexuality against the death-squeeze of the ascetic Irish Church. Here I disagree with Maurice Harmon, who argues that Clarke “may not want to celebrate sin” (67); “The Young Woman of Beare” is Clarke’s least abashed celebration of sin, attenuated by his realistic accounting of its social—more than moral—costs. In addition, though I agree with Harmon that the poem implicates “an over-rigorous, male-dominated church,” I would hesitate to argue that “the sinful predicament in which Gormlai and the Young Woman find themselves is not freely chosen” (72). The young woman is both clearly aware of the consequences of her actions and willing to enter into them. To my reading, her refusal to become

a “victim” (72) in the way Harmon defines it above, and also in William Roscelli’s terms (63)—she evades capture again and again over the course of the poem—is a measure of her freedom, one that she invents for herself.

But before Clarke delves into the dangers of moral dogmatism he offers an alternative in the title poem to *Pilgrimage*. Through its imagery he proposes an acceptance of contradiction and opposition in order to allow an enriching, Blakean sense of depth to both poem and culture. “Pilgrimage” is a poem that works beautifully to accomplish the crossing, braiding, and bringing together of opposites. The pilgrims arrival at Clonmacnoise centers the poem’s theme of poetic and cultural richness.

Grey holdings of rain  
Had grown less with the fields,  
As we came to that blessed place  
Where hail and honey meet. (12-15)

Here the grey rain contrasts with the (presumably) green fields; and “hail and honey” are not merely opposites in tone but also references to biblical plagues and blessings, suggesting that religious life in Ireland is both a blessing and a plague. Clarke’s grey rain is not a romanticization of wild Irish weather to be appropriated for its confinement to the primitive, but as in Kavanagh, it signals the darkness inherent in such representations; and as in MacGreevy, landscape functions to multiply the possibilities of representation. The poem continues with contrasts of light and darkness, black and white, high and low, pagan and Christian, land and sea, sound and silence. The poem’s very first line contains the first contrast, where “the far south glittered/ Behind the grey bearded plains” (1-2). A good deal of scholarship exists on the entire collection’s exploration of the Celto-Romanesque period of Irish history, particularly in its



(imagined) weaving together of pagan and Christian practices to create a harmonious society where art and passion flourish. G. Craig Tapping writes that in *Pilgrimage*, “art, craft, culture, language and Godhead are held in bright, holy union” (55) and that “this pre-Norman Ireland has a religion of its own—a happy combination of Christian idea and pagan vitality” (56). But Clarke’s use of contrasts goes beyond the veneration of an historical period and invites a consideration of it as a strategy against fundamentalism.

Clarke’s employment of contrasts in “Pilgrimage” creates an energy and vitality in the poem that sets the stage for the deprivations of the next poem, “Celibacy,” in which a Paul-like priest wrestles with temptations of the flesh. In “Pilgrimage,” the vivid image of “cunning hands with cold and jewels” that “brought chalices to flame” (21-22) invites a passionate response, and indeed “a sound/ Of wild confession rose” (47-48). “Celibacy,” on the other hand, employs contrasts not to invite richness but to defeat it in a demonstration of what happens when one imperative seeks to bury another. Against the “brown isle of Lough Corrib/ When clouds were bare as branch” (1-2) and “the grey fire of the nettle, (9)” the temptation arrives as “an Angel:/ Dewes dripped from those bright feet” (16-17). But instead of allowing the Angel to stay in his mind, the speaker attempts to vanquish her, as he “wrestled her in hair-shirt” (27). Clarke cannot help but create beauty even in lines about deprivation, however, and we see that despite the speaker’s attempt to purge his temptation she remains a vital force in the poem and in his imagination. In the last stanza

The dragons of the Gospel  
Are cast by bell and crook;  
But fiery as the frost  
Or bladed light, she drew

The reeds back, when I fought  
The arrow-headed airs  
That darken on the water. (35-40)

The Angel is winning; no matter how hard the speaker tries to cast her out she will not leave. Like the young woman of Beare, the speaker's temptress, though she is only a dream-figure, is tenacious in her efforts to thwart the boundaries of her freedom. She aggressively seeks to overcome the speaker's attempts at maintaining the border between celibacy and wantonness, acting as "bladed light;" this is truly spiritual warfare, but rather than championing the boundaries the poem reads as if Clarke were rooting for their dissolution.

Similarly, in "The Confession of Queen Gormlai" Clarke employs contrast to create a rich and vivid image of the Gormlai's life and culture and to mitigate the oppressions of rigidity. The poem describes a rape. Earlier in the poem the queen says that "no man has seen me naked,/ Partaken in my shame" (62-63) which suggests that the encounter with Carroll that she will later describe is not one of mutual consent.

He drank at posted fires  
Where armies had been glutted  
And he shrank bars of iron  
Whenever his hand shut.  
At night was it not lust,  
Though I were fast in prayers,  
For Carroll with his muscle  
To thrust me in black hair? (80-88)

Gormlai's descriptions of Carroll are all violent. He is no respecter of women, of the land ("He cropped the greener land/ To Cashel top" [89-90]), or of the faith of Cormac ("He took/ The bishop in his chapel/ And wrung the holy mass-book" [90-92]). The poet's repetition of the short "u" sound in "glutted," "shut," "lust" and "muscle," words associated with aggression, serve to strengthen the impact of "thrust" at the end of the stanza. Clarke here qualifies his definition of freedom. Boundary-crossing is a means to rebel against oppression, not perpetrate it. Consider Gormlai's flight from Carroll to join Nial: clearly she is running from convention as well. In addition to leaving the husband sanctioned by her father, her new lover is "of [Gormlai's] kin" (108). The queen's description of her escape with Nial echoes that of the young woman of Beare's.

For drizzling miles we kissed,  
We clung to the glistening saddle  
On roads that rang and misted  
Below us, promised madly  
To pray, but in cold heather  
We broke the marriage ring,  
Under your leathern cloak,  
By thoughts that were a sin. (129-36)

Clarke's repetition of the "s" sound in "drizzle," "miles," "kissed," "glistening," "saddle," "misted," and "promised" in the first part of the stanza softens the encounter and covers the entire section with drizzle and mist, a contrast to the "hail" (124) from which they escape in the previous stanza, and to the blunt force of the rape stanza. The second half of the escape stanza celebrates rather than condemns the lovers' thwarting of conventional moral constraints for the

sake of the freedom of love. Here “*we broke the marriage ring*” (emphasis added), an act that Gormlai consents, rather than relents, to. Nial’s cloak encloses Gormlai in an act of protection rather than confinement. Later they will bow to convention by “receiv[ing] the sacraments/ Within the holy week” (47-48), but not before having first allowed their love to flourish where it is not officially sanctioned. Still, there is a freedom in the queen’s new life because of the love that borne it; in contrast to Cormac, who “wore the shirt/ Of fire, the shoes of stone” (106-7), her “days were filled/ With ease” (161-2) until Nial’s death at the hands of “strange blue crowds/ That cry in driven sleet” (178-9). Unlike the young woman of Beare, however, Queen Gormlai chooses to live alone in poverty after Nial is killed, giving herself up to a life of deprivation similar to that of Cormac and yet also not willing to part with the vestiges of yet-unfulfilled desire. “. . . and though I grovel/ As Cormac in true shame,/ I am impure with love” (189-91). In this poem, hail and honey meet in a story that dramatizes both the need for freedom (here, in love) and its inevitable costs.

One of these costs, in the world of Clarke’s poetic, is a secure notion of place as a shelter against loneliness and rootlessness. Kavanagh’s poetry is imbued with a sense of home and place, whereas Clarke is, as Seamus Heaney has also called himself, a kind of “inner-exile” (Grennan 151). Clarke’s home spaces are, like MacGreevy’s, unattainable except in dreams (see Clarke’s “Wandering Men”). Craig Tapping regards Clarke as an “insider,” a native, in contrast to Protestant, aristocratic, Anglo-Irish Yeats, who came to the traditions about which he wrote and admired from the “outside,” as it were (17). But this “insider” is not immune to the possibility of alienation, to which even Kavanagh the homebody can attest. Eamon Grennan argues that in *Pilgrimage*, the poet “simply belongs, and speaks out of that clear sense of belonging. He makes out of his craft a world of which he is a native” (151). The poet may not

bring attention to his own alienation (except perhaps in the last poem, “Aisling”), as he will do in *Night and Morning*, but the underpinnings for it are already in *Pilgrimage* and the additional poems in *Collected Poems* (1936), both of which precede *Night and Morning*, in the voices of his restless, fleeing, rootless characters. In addition to the movements of the young woman of Beare, Queen Gormlai, the pilgrims, and the planter’s daughter, the men in “Wandering Men” (from the *Collected Poems*) find a temporary home not in a physical location in a specific community but in a fleeting vision (a “momentary flame” [7]) of the fused, centaurial figure of a pagan and Christian Brigid. The vision is complete with tables, food, and ale (which recalls the homey description of the indoors in “Southwesterly Gale”) and full of light (15). Curiously, though they “shared” (18) “the food of Eden” (17), each of the men is seated at his own table, which suggests that the vision is not of a single parish but of a larger cultural ideal that roots them not in place but in vision. Of course the vision does not stay; the ideal of a beautifully woven Christian and pagan Ireland cannot not borne out by reality on the ground, which *Pilgrimage* demonstrates despite the complex beauty of its world. Still,

we gave praise to that sky-woman  
For wayfare and a vision shown  
At night to harmless men who have  
No parish of their own. (37-40)

The cultural unity for which Devlin, Kavanagh, and Clarke yearn is, as all three work out in their poetry, not possible to achieve. What Clarke suggests here is that alienation can be tempered by vision, and that however much the vision is not and never was a reality, vision can offer momentary sustenance to the lonely poet.

“Aisling” from *Pilgrimage* is less satisfying on this count, particularly as the female object of vision in the seventeenth-century Irish *aisling* promises hope and renewal; for Clarke she confuses rather than clarifies, scatters rather than gathers. Here again a wandering man—this time, alone—comes across a woman who may be, as he guesses, Geraldine (presumably the Geraldine of Coleridge’s *Cristabel*), Penelope (“O do you cross/ The blue thread and the crimson on the framework, At darkfall in a house where nobles throng” [29-31]), or Niav (or Niamh from Irish mythology). But unlike Brigid, whose identity is transparent and who comes to the men to willingly welcome them into her sanctuary, this woman works to evade the speaker’s intrusion by refusing to satisfy the speaker’s curiosities. Instead she answers his questions with a question about *his* origins: “But from what bay, uneasy with a shipping/ Breeze, have you come?” (28-29). The speaker cannot answer her with any more clarity than she has answered him, because he hails from nowhere; he is “without praise, without wine, in rich strange lands” (46). The strange woman is only willing to share a description of the pleasures of her home, but it acts as a tease rather than the respite of Brigid’s appearance.

“Black and fair strangers leave upon the oar  
And there is peace,” she answered. “Companies  
Are gathered in the house that I have known;  
Claret is on the board and they are pleased  
By storytelling. When the turf is redder  
And airy packs of wonder have been told,  
My women dance to bright steel that is wed,  
Starlike, upon the anvil with one stroke. (33-40)

The woman knows peace, company, and entertainment in her place of origin, and here again is the description of a rich culture in its hay-day characterized by good literature and craftsmanship, all things unified “with one stroke.” But these things are distant, and the speaker will not partake in them, as the men of “Wandering Men” are able to do. Instead her description of hearth and home sharpens the pitch of the speaker’s loneliness, and causes him to wonder aloud if he is wander, rootless, forever. The strange woman leaves him with a smile (47) without the satisfaction of her identity or the promise of someday arriving at his own warm abode. Both the speaker of “Aisling” and the men of “Wandering Men” wander, but the men do not appear to seek anything in particular; the poem does not indicate that they desire to arrive anywhere. They are content with the vision of Brigid that gives them strength to continue, whereas the sad man of “Aisling” is left alone with his longing. In these two poems Clarke offers the reader two different approaches to the problems of personal alienation and cultural deprivation: either one can seek the unity and perfection of a real community at peace with others and itself (and be disappointed every time) or she can content herself with the vision of the same to sustain her in her inevitable wanderings. The poems of *Pilgrimage* argue that the former leads only to sorrow, as in “The Confession of Queen Gormlai,” whereas the latter, demonstrated beautifully in “The Young Woman of Beare,” which is not completely without suffering, is at least punctuated by moments of real freedom and joy.

Like other poets of this period, Clarke’s success lies partially in the depth of his comprehension of and empathy for human suffering.

This sympathetic understanding of the human condition—the ceaseless quest for Eden which inevitably leads us to the cloister or the bed, which makes ideals into abstractions and turns our lust to ashes, which rips away the last veil of our

illusion and leaves us naked in our weakness—that made Clarke, if not a poet of the foremost rank, nevertheless a vital one for those of us who could still believe in sin. (Roscelli 59)

Despite his compulsion to reduce Clarke's importance (a common theme in earlier criticism about Clarke), Roscelli recognizes that Clarke's empathy makes his poetry both universal and moving for the individual reader. I would argue that this *does* make Clarke a poet of "the foremost rank;" that he could, in a culture in which Church and government fostered an atmosphere of personal and corporate denial and disengagement, develop a poetic that engaged *relentlessly* with matters of great personal complexity. Clarke's voice, and of his contemporaries, was in many respects the voice of a people for whom a sufficient forum did not exist for the expression of suffocation, emptiness, doubt, disillusionment, and anger. Empathy in Clarke's poetry is a function of the poet's ability to comprehend the conflicting strands of the cultural moment and weave them together into a poetic that is both universally modern (though not "modernist" by critically narrow definitions) and peculiarly Irish. Craig Tapping attributes the social relevance of Clarke's poetry to its departure from the romantic impulses of the Revival. "Writing that is socially relevant and immersed in daily life and common pursuits requires a keener, more directly shared language than does the chronicle of exiled imagination or the record of private meditation and experience;" Clarke favored artifact over artifice (25; 27). While I disagree a disavowal of Romanticism is necessary for a socially germane poetry—after all, Kavanagh's dystopian pastoral is as relevant as Clarke's eschewal of it—Tapping does get right the balance Clarke strikes in his poetry between the use of imagination (particularly in *Pilgrimage*) and grounding in contemporary concerns.



*Night and Morning* (1938) is widely regarded as Clarke's move out of the mythical and the historic and into the personal battle between his need for spiritual fulfillment and his continued, but now more vocal, opposition to the Irish Church, particularly in its turning away from reason at the Council of Trent. Maurice Harmon sees the collection as an expression of identification with the suffering, flesh-bound Christ (79) and the scholastics whose efforts to "harmonise the philosophy of Aristotle with the teachings of the Church fathers" (77) come to naught at Trent (80). In Gregory Schirmer's reading of "Repentence," "man inevitably suffers this kind of anguish because the conflict between faith and reason is fought across an unbridgeable gulf" (49). Craig Tapping argues that in *Night and Morning*, "Dogma, standing in the way of an instinctive humanism, is challenged with . . . a new spiritual candor" (163-4); in "Penal Law," "dogma stifles the inspiring vitality of rational inquiry. Faith and knowledge are now irreconcilable; the latter denies God, the former limits his creation, mankind" (168). Vivian Mercier formulates the central paradox of *Night and Morning*: "faith and spirituality both form part of the emotional life, reason and the suppression of instinct part of the intellectual life" (96). In his article about Clarke, Séan Lucy argues that *Night and Morning* is fundamentally about the conflicts between faith and reason and between desire and guilt (12).

But the focus on the struggle between faith and reason in this collection misses the distinction the poet makes between reason and what he calls "thought" (and sometimes substitutes "truth"), which the poetry loosely describes as the free movement of the mind and heart unhindered by faith *or* reason. Although in the title poem thought, which under the reign of the Church "still lives in pain" (18), is more closely identified with reason, in the rest of the collection it is distinct from reason, which is nothing more than institutionalized thought no longer driven by a primitive energy. Thought is not only alive but eternal. In "The Lucky Coin"

the soul “can make make a man afraid/ And yet thought will endure” (3-4). In “The Jewels,” “ordinary thought prevail[s]/ In all this knocking of the ribs/ And the dead heat of mortal haste” (9-11); in “Summer Lightning” “every thought at last/ Must stand in our own light/ Forever, sinning without end” (34-36), which emphasizes both thought’s immortality and its opposition to institutionalized spirituality. In “Night and Morning,” where “thought still lives in pain” (18) after the “saints had their day at last” (17), and “Mortal Pride,” the restriction of thought is an occasion of suffering.

When thought of all our thought has crossed  
The mind in pain, God only knows  
What we must suffer to be lost,  
What soul is called our own.  
Before the truth was hid in torment,  
With nothing but this mortal pride,  
I dreamed of every joy on earth  
And shamed the angel at my side. (1-8)

Thought here as in elsewhere is associated with freedom and joy; but to live with thought and truth is also to suffer in other ways, as Clarke will elaborate in the remainder of the collection.

Clarke’s most sustained engagement with the notion of thought as I articulate it here is in the oft-cited “The Straying Student,” which again is assumed to be a contemplation of the conflict between faith and reason. The temptress, after all, arrives in the middle of Mass to draw the student away. Our first clue is the word “vision” (6) in the first stanza, which recalls the vision in “Wandering Men” and associates the woman not with hard reason but with inspired enlightenment. The student describes his training under her care:

I learned the prouder counsel of her throat,  
My mind was growing bold as the light in Greece;  
And when in sleep her stirring limbs were shown,  
I blessed the noonday rock that knew no tree:  
And for an hour the mountain was her throne,  
Although her eyes were bright with mockery. (18-23)

She is not merely the light of reason but the stuff of dreams, of vision. The light that the woman brings is brighter than that which shines in classrooms; and in the next stanza the poet makes it clear that her influence is separate from that of his training at Salamanca (a place in Spain where many priests trained before returning to Ireland), which he associates with reason rather than thought: “They say I was sent back from Salamanca/ And failed in logic, but I wrote her praise/ Nine times upon a college wall in France” (24-26). The freedom she represents is in stark contrast to the place from which he came. The student, who returns to Ireland a priest, fears that back in his home country he will lose her influence; like Kavanagh’s Father Mat he understands well the pressures faced by a spokesman for the Church. At the end of the poem he is still reveling in the world she has opened to him,

And yet I tremble lest she may deceive me  
And leave me in this land, where every woman’s son  
Must carry his own coffin and believe,  
In dread, all that the clergy teach the young. (30-36)

Ireland and the priesthood, overlaid with death, are enemies to thought; the price the student-turned-priest pays for his affair with thought is that he now understands that he will carry his own coffin; in an inverted version of what I will discuss at greater length in my reading of

“Repentance,” thought in the form of this woman brings the student from a state of doomed childhood to an enlightened adulthood that now allows him to see the chains by which his mind is threatened to be bound upon his return.

*Night and Morning* fluctuates between examples of the pain and frustration of hedged thought, desire, and even faith, and images of wildness and freedom that threaten to undermine and eventually destroy the institutions which bind us. Although *Night and Morning* does focus more sharply on the need for intellectual freedom versus the sexual freedom of *Pilgrimage*, sexuality continues to play a role in the collection; in “The Penal Law” it doubles as a reaffirmation of fleshly freedom and as a metaphor for intellectual freedom. At just four lines it is the shortest poem in the collection and also its most defiant.

Burn Ovid with the rest. Lovers will find  
A hedge-school for themselves and learn by heart  
All that the clergy banish from the mind,  
When hands are joined and head bows in the dark. (1-4)

The burned book references censorship; the title of the poem recalls a time when the practice of faith was illegal; and the description of stolen moments between lovers reasserts Clarke’s concerns over the extinction of love under Church rule. The inclusion all three of Clarke’s major areas of repression—intellectual, spiritual, and physical—come together in this poem not necessarily to restate his views on them individually but to undermine the very idea of total repression. Most of Clarke’s poems are pessimistic on this note; a look at the next poem in the collection, “Her Voice Could Not Be Softer,” in which a woman’s guilty conscience ends a stolen embrace, is more typical of them. But “The Penal Law” is less interested in the strength of repression than in the failure of its totality. “Lovers *will* find/ A hedge-school *for themselves* and

learn *by heart*” (emphasis added). Clarke does not offer here what one could call hope, but he does attest that for all their attempts to control real human beings, systems of oppression will always on some level come to failure. Both of Clarke’s mid-century collections hang on that failure as evidence that life remains despite efforts to stamp it out. In some ways, especially as “The Penal Law” specifically references censorship, Clarke’s life-remnant is a larger metaphor for the survival of poetry at this crucial juncture in Ireland’s history. Poets will write lively, imaginative, socially relevant, well-crafted poetry (though perhaps “in the dark,” published in small presses or not at all). Similarly, lovers in the nostalgic poem “The Lucky Coin” allow their love to flourish despite the threats it poses to their standing in the Church.

On Nephin many a knot was tied,  
The sweet in tongue made free there,  
Lovers forgot on the mountain-side  
The stern law of the clergy  
That kiss, pinch, squeeze, bug, smack denied,  
Forgot the evil, harm  
And scandal that comes closer, lying  
In one another’s arms. (32-40)

Theirs are marriages sanctioned by nothing but mutual desire and love, and with the mention of Nephim, pre-Christian social practices.

In “Martha Blake,” a woman’s bodily desire to experience ecstasy cannot be completely curtailed by the Church’s tight controls on sexual expression. The poet describes Martha’s daily ritual of partaking of the Eucharist in terms normally reserved for unsanctioned romantic encounters. Before the town properly wakes up, Martha “dares/ The silence of the street” (3-4).

“O then her soul/ Makes bold in the arms of sound” (7-8). For her the morning Mass is a stolen pleasure. In the second stanza the poet cautions that despite her immoderate nature, Martha is still bound through obedience to the Church. “Her well-taught knees are humble” (10). Then the Mass begins, and in stanzas three through six Martha partakes in the Eucharist with a sensuality that directly conflicts with nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperatives for asceticism and more closely reflects the medieval spiritual sensuality of the feminine mystics.

She trembles for the Son of Man,  
While the priest is murmuring  
What she can scarcely tell, her heart  
Is making such a stir;  
But when he picks a particle  
And she puts out her tongue,  
That joy is the glittering of candles  
And benediction sung. (25-32)

Clarke’s use of “t” and “p” sounds through the stanza heightens the sense of urgency and suggests that Martha’s desires are hard and insistent (particularly when the priest “picks a particle”) rather than soft and yielding.<sup>37</sup> This fourth stanza marks the height of her ecstasy; in stanza six Martha falls into a post-coital calm. The entire poem, then, mimics the stolen sexual encounter, but in placing it in a religious context not only gives Clarke a metaphor that conveniently criticizes the Church for its sexual asceticism, but lends credibility to the notion of sensuality as integral to a real, lived faith. And there is nothing the Church can do to repress it;

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<sup>37</sup>Clarke’s attention to sound, including his use of consonance and assonance, is well established in Clarke criticism. See Maurice Harmon and Gregory Schirmer in particular.

“For soul can never be immodest/ Where body may not listen” (47-48). The penultimate stanza affirms that this is a poem is less about the need to express physical desire (and the desperation that might lead one to find it in the Church, the very place it is least welcome) than its free movement inside the experience of faith. Here we also see an undermining of the faith/reason dichotomy; instead of elevating reason above faith (which critics often mistake for dogmatism, which is the real target), Clarke frees Martha from both a stifled, conventional faith and the limits of reason.

The flame in heart is never grieved  
That pride and intellect  
Were cast below, when God revealed  
A heaven for this earth. (53-56)

Here the revelation of a physically present God (which recalls the final line of “Night and Morning,” “God was made man once more” [36]) becomes a flame in Martha’s heart; the symbol of the wild, bright light that upsets established norms will recur in two other poems in the collection (“Summer Lightning” and “The Jewels”) that offer a wildness which cannot be contained. It is the energy necessary for life itself. Martha goes to daily Mass not out of a sense of devotion but because “to begin the common day/ She needs a miracle” (57-58).

In contrast to the freedom Martha Blake finds in stolen Eucharistic ecstasy are poems in *Night and Morning* which detail the pain that comes from stricture of any kind. Immediately following “Martha Blake” is “Repentance,” which references Clarke’s childhood experience of innocence lost described in his memoir *The Black Church*. In it the priest hearing the seven-year-old’s confession forces Clarke to confess masturbation, a sin for which at that point he had no knowledge. In a distortion of the Genesis story of the transition from innocence to the knowledge

of sin, it is the priest that ushers the child into the realm of sin, not the devil. In the first stanza of “Repentance” the child lives in a world of physical beauty and in it finds both joy and energy for living.

When I was younger than the soul  
That wakes me now at night, I saw  
The mortal mind in such a glory—  
All knowledge was in Connaught.  
I crossed the narrows of earthward light,  
The rain, noon-set along the mountain,  
And I forgot the scale of thought,  
Man’s lamentation, Judgment hour  
That hides the sun in the waters. (1-9)

As in Martha Blake the joyful state Clarke describes is *between* faith and reason, found not in the conflict between the two but in a third space undictated by the demands of either as expressed in stifling institutions (the “scale of thought,” the “Judgment hour”). This is a spiritual ecstasy (it is “such a glory”) based on the earth-bound experience of freedom. But in the second stanza St. Patrick drives out “a crowd/ Of fiends that roared like cattlemen” (11-12), or the serpents that doubly represent the devil and the kind of wildness the poet describes in the first stanza. The figure of the snake in this poem is Clarke’s introduction of the ambivalent nature of wildness; for here the snake is both associated with the freedom of unmediated earthly joy and the snatcher of that joy through the actions of the priest. The figure of Patrick also brings to mind the theme of foreign invasion of *Pilgrimage*; only this time, as in “The Marriage Night,” the promise of a new



spirituality quickly becomes an occupation. The joy of the first stanza quickly turns into pain in the remaining stanzas.

I count the sorrowful mysteries  
Of earth before the celebrant  
Has turned to wash his mouth in wine  
The soul is confined to a holy vessel,  
And intellect less than desire.  
O I will stay to the last Gospel,  
Cupping my heart with prayer:  
Knuckle and knee are all we know  
When the mind is half despairing.

The mind (“all knowledge was in Connaught” [4]) and spirit, once satisfied in the freedom of the countryside, are now rent and the speaker must seek refuge in ritual; and unlike Martha Blake, he has not yet learned to circumvent the institution’s repressions by allowing sensuality to abound in ritual. The priest’s cutting down of the flesh ensures that for him.

Two poems, “Summer Lightning” and “The Jewels” offer portraits of the unpredictable, unfettered element of wildness that turns the whole world upside down and backwards. The “Summer Lightning” is akin to the metaphor of foreign invasion so ubiquitous in *Pilgrimage* and present to a certain extent in “Repentance,” but offers both more promise and more potential for deadliness. Like other of Clarke’s poems (particularly “The Young Woman of Beare”), “Summer Lightning” is divided into two parts, though not equally. In the first three stanzas, the lightning is hardly a welcome visitor; to those whose folly it uncovers, it brings devastation. The world turns on its head as night becomes a perverse version of day.

The heavens opened. With a scream  
The blackman at his night-prayers  
Had disappeared in blasphemy,  
And iron beds were bared;  
Day was unshuttered again,  
The elements had lied,  
Ashing the faces of mad men  
Until God's likeness died. (1-8)

Clarke's use of "the heavens" suggests that the lightning is the instrument of God's wrath; the blacksmith is possibly quite literally struck by lightning, as he is not merely revealed but destroyed as well. At first it appears that the lightning's target as an instrument of God is his likeness, for the next stanza finds "Napolean took his glittering vault/ To be a looking-glass" (9-10). The sin is the attempt to exceed earthly limitations and become God, *Paradise Lost*-style. Akin to a photo-negative, whereas most of Clarke's other poetry is expressly about God becoming man, this half of the poem seem to read as the perversion of the equation—man becomes God—and the delusion of "mad men." This reference to madness, along with the iron beds, which would have been typical in a mental institution, the mention of syphilis (which causes dementia), cells (12), and the "dormitory" in line 17 point to Clarke's own stay in a mental asylum a decade earlier. It also reasserts Clarke's preoccupation with notions of freedom and restriction. The patients, including "the unfrocked priest" (28), like Martha Blake and the lovers in "The Penal Law," will find a way out of their cells; but the degree of incarceration here is so extreme that their only option is madness. The indictment of the sin of pride, then, is overwhelmed by the lightning's revelation of the dehumanizing effects of extreme restriction. In

“Summer Lightning” it is not a matter just of hegemonic, cultural limitation but of total physical control, so that the mental institution becomes a metaphor for its less extreme version in State and Church. The patient roster crosses socioeconomic lines, as the inmates include an emperor (Napolean), a nobleman (Lord Mitchell), and both Catholic (Christopher O’Brien) and Protestant (James Dunn) commoners. The implication is that cultural repression affects the whole social fabric. Although the lightning reveals the pride of the mad men (at least in Napolean’s case), the poem is more sympathetic to them, finding their humanity in their likeness to God, not in their eschewal of it. Clarke’s use of “until” in the last line of the first stanza quoted above—which indicates that the lightning is an assault meant to kill what the inmates have left of their humanity—anticipates the second portion of the poem, just two stanzas long, in which the poet expresses sympathy both for their responses to restriction and the death of their spirituality.

When sleep has shot the bolt and bar,  
And reason fails at midnight,  
Dreading that every thought at last  
Must stand in our own light  
Forever, sinning without end:  
I pity, in their pride  
And agony of wrong, the men  
In whom God’s likeness died. (40-48)

Here again the conflict is not between reason and faith, as reason cannot survive the asylum any better than faith can. Only thought—which is outside of both faith and reason—can go on, though thought here is a sin, which is appropriate to a place where physical restriction is based, essentially, on thought-crime. Thought is not only outside faith and reason but enemies to the

dogmatic versions of each. In this way mental illness presents a challenge both in ways that threaten Church and State, hence incarceration. If ever there were an ultimate cost for the exercise of freedom (save for execution), this is it.

But in this the second portion of the poem, lightning represents not indictment but enlightenment, and not the kind that we associate with the Age of Reason. The penultimate stanza presents “thought” as story-telling, music, and comedy; lightning reveals not only the patients’ oppressions but their stolen joy between the bars of their cells.

Flight beyond flight, new stories flashed  
Or darkened with affliction  
Until the sweet choir of Mount Argus  
Was heard at every window,  
Was seen in every wing. The blackman  
Kept laughing at his night-prayers  
For somebody in white had taken  
His photograph downstairs. (32-39)

The reference to photography becomes explicit in this stanza, though this time it is a joke: no longer allowed the distinction of human as made in the image of God, the patient gets to be created in the image of himself by someone whose clothes make him the photographic opposite of the blacksmith. The flash of the bulb is akin to the lightning in that it is supposed to be neutral; it reveals both laughter and laugh-lines. Both lightning and photograph intrude on a world that its guardians mean no one to see, and reveal the life-taking consequences of mental and physical incarceration as well as the irrepressible resistance to those limitations. As in “Penal Laws,” which references censorship, Clarke includes artistic expression as one of those

irrepressible forms of resistance, so that “Summer Lightning” is not just about mental asylums and religious repression but also about the survival of art in such circumstances. His poetry was, after all, written in a period of Irish history known best for its cultural and spiritual oppressions; Clarke’s own poetry is the laughter and song of the man shackled to his proverbial bed.

“The Jewels,” the last poem Clarke published until *Ancient Lights* appeared in 1955, comes right after “Summer Lightning” and addresses a culture’s use of history. Again Clarke presents a force outside of faith and reason that like the foreign invader can bring both further repression or freedom, depending on how it arrives and how one uses its power. In this case, that force is love. Like “Summer Lightning,” love in the beginning of the poem is destructive; but even in the overzealous act of disassembly it

The crumbling centuries are thrust  
In hands that are too frail for them  
And we, who squabble with our dust,  
Have learned in anguish to dissemble.  
Yet taken in the darkest need  
Of mind, no faith makes me ashamed.  
Whether the breath is foul or sweet  
The truth is still the same. (1-8)

Although the sense of the stanza is that the jewels turn to dust, Clarke makes the *hands* frail instead of the jewels, which references both human frailty and calls into question the identity of “dust” in line three. Is it the dust of the “crumbling centuries” or that of the “hands” that handle them? History in these first lines is both a treasure and curse, both eternal and mortal. Love here is possessive. We “squabble” over history, fight over our inheritance to the point of taking apart

what is already barely holding together. Clarke's own complicated relationship with cultural inheritance comes through in this poem, and in this period of overt questioning of the aims and outcomes of the Revival the poem stands as a sharp criticism of the tug-of-war between cultural nationalists and dystopianists like Kavanagh and Clarke himself (arguably Clarke implicates himself through the use of the first person plural). Love for one's history and culture is not the sin here—for that he cannot be ashamed—but the manner of its expression. The third stanza presents love in its best form, which is in its ability to transcend the petty uses of its power.

We are undone  
Within the winking of an eyelid,  
The very heavens are assailed  
And there is nothing can be hidden:  
Love darts and thunders from the rail. (27-31)

In this stanza love evades religion in the reference to the rail (and in "greed of religion" (26) earlier in the stanza). Like the lightning in the previous poem in the collection, love reveals everything. This time love invades the heavens, a reversal of heaven's assault in "Summer Lightning." Again in the last stanza we see love overwhelm both faith and reason, and again Clarke associates it with youth, as he did in "Repentance."

The misery of common faith  
Was ours before the age of reason.  
Hurrying years cannot mistake  
The smile for the decaying teeth,  
The last confusion of our sense.  
But O to think, when I was younger

And could not tell the difference,  
God lay upon this tongue. (32-40)

Clarke's reference to the Eucharist recalls Martha Blake's transcendent experience of the Mass and elevates spirituality—informed by love—to a place outside of the “greed of religion” in the previous stanza that “makes us old/ Before our time” (26-27). The real opposition in this collection is not faith and reason but something more like Blake's Innocence and Experience, making Clarke one of Blake's direct descendants.<sup>38</sup> Youth exists in a space that precedes the categories of faith and reason and is where Clarke's ideal spirituality—that which is bound by nothing and carried by love allowed to flourish without restraint—resides. In this poem as in the others, however, the forces that allow that spirituality to thrive continue to survive after childhood, though they can be harder to locate within the structures that would limit their powers. In her discussion of Clarke's figure of the frustrated lover, Beth Timson sees Clarke as romantic in a more pedestrian sense of the term. “For always . . . Clarke is the unquenchable romantic spirit who believes in the existence and the power of love . . .” (69). On a larger scale, what Clarke's poems profess is an undying belief in the ability of love, thought, and artistic expression to survive the oppressions of religious and cultural institutions, despite the high cost to the individual for following the eternal vision. Clarke's pessimism cannot overwhelm his own vision of a flower emerging from a tiny crack in solid stone.

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<sup>38</sup> A good deal of work has been done on the Blake's influence on Yeats. Although it is outside of the scope of this chapter, the relationship between Clarke and Blake, and the question of how much Yeats filtered that influence is a topic that deserves further study.

## INSIDE THE FOX'S COVERT: BLANAID SALKELD

May Morton's 1951 poem "Spindle and Shuttle" recounts a history of Ireland not to be found elsewhere in literature of the period. Not only does it mark time through industry rather than politics (or through the politics of Industry), the poem does so exclusively from the perspective of the women who work in that industry, writing a history of women ("It was my mother's cloth, her mother's too" [line 9]). The poem's conceptual organization around the mechanics of weaving—opposing forces as engines of creation—and its alliterative focus on the physical sounds of weaving foregrounds a sense of perpetual work and activity against the dominant literary theme of stagnation and famine that dominates the work of male poets of the mid-twentieth century. Whereas Kavanagh's Maguire from "The Great Hunger" runs fallow circles around his field, the women of "Spindle and Shuttle" both witness and fuel the emergence of modernization in the weaving industry. But Morton's poem is not a hymn to progress; it also contains a scathing indictment of the abuses of power that come with technological advancement. Advances in weaving, according to Morton's poem, have the potential to both liberate and enslave female (and child) laborers: In the days of cottage weaving,

The old blind woman with

Her spinning-wheel beside the open door



Would spin and spin with fingertips with eyes  
Matching the spindle's hunger to her own  
Till each was satisfied; but she could feel  
The warm sun on her face, the kindly wind  
Lay gentle hands upon her faded hair. (51-57)

In the new age of factory weaving—here referring to the Industrial Revolution—workers are free of the drudgery of cottage-weaving but become “wage slaves”

And women hurry, shapeless in their shawls  
In multitudes made nameless, to the mill,  
Some young, some old, and many great with child:  
All wage slaves of the new industrial age,  
All temple vestals of the linen god. (72-76)

But then, as the industry takes hold,

The spinner and the weaver in the mill  
Now earn a living and have time to live,  
Children whose mothers were half-timers once  
Untouchables in factory in school  
May learn to play and even play to learn  
And think of spindle as a word to spell.  
Mill-girls have shed their shawl-cacoon and shine  
Brighter than butterflies. (104-111)

Thus “Spindle and Shuttle” is neither traditionalist nor pro-modernization. Its task is not a larger ideological stance on modernization as better or worse than a traditional rural economy but a

contemplation of the potentialities—positive and negative—of technological advancement in industry, weaving back in a traditionalist, timeless notion of dialectics (“Good twined with evil, evil twined with good” [102]).

Two other female Irish poets of this period, Temple Lane and Rhoda Coghill, also offer perspectives that differ significantly from male ones of the period. Lane’s “O’Driscoll Courting” inserts women’s refusals into the narrative of Church-sanctioned frigidity. The poem’s female protagonist is wedged between a man’s insistence upon marriage and the Church’s insistence upon purity to the extent that she must decide between the man’s threats of suicide and her own moral death. Despite the fact that her decision to spurn the man’s advances signals her submission to the authority of the Church, Temple gives voice to her refusal rather than presenting it as an inevitability. The speaker of the poem is the male lover, so that his female object resists possession as both body and symbol. “My mind had her, but her soul was free” (line 64). The speaker attempts to recover some utility for her actions but can only admit to her power in the form of a warning:

I, eighty years, tell any lad to-day,

When Faith has left you for lust, have sense!

If you should harm a girl who starts to pray

You’ll never make your soul for pounds or pence—

Virgins in Heaven control great influence. (72-76)

Similarly, the speaker of Coghill’s “Flight” echoes Austin Clarke’s Queen Gormlai in her need to escape men’s violence and the necessity of boldness in the face of a lack of shelter. Having avoided the road that makes her feel the “raking of the flesh,/ the harrow of love’s remembered violence” (45-6),

today she takes that road in the late afternoon  
when already across the bloodshot sky the rooks  
are blinking home. She is no longer afraid while  
the year lasts, knowing the watchdog daylight  
whines in November on a shortened leash.

Blanaid Salkeld is one of the least-read of mid-twentieth-century Irish poets, but compared to Devlin, MacGreevy, Clarke, Kavanagh, and Beckett, her published poetry is voluminous in both the number of publications and the length of each. Beginning with *Hello, Eternity* (1933), she continued to publish at regular intervals throughout mid-century, with *The Fox's Covert* (1935), *A Dubliner* (1943), . . . *the engine is left running* (1937) and *Experiment in Error* (1955). Despite her immersion in the cultural life of Ireland as a long-standing actress at the Abbey, her poetry belies a deep sense of isolation, not only as a woman-poet writing in the margins of domestic obligation, but as a chronically under-read poet wondering aloud if the tree she felled would ever be found. Certainly this sense of disconnectedness and alienation makes her poetry resonant with that of Devlin the cosmopolitan, MacGreevy the returned and broken soldier, Clarke the scorned outcast, Kavanagh the misunderstood peasant-poet, and Beckett the exiled ultra-modernist; but Salkeld's place as a woman and mother in an upper-middle-class Anglo-Irish marriage during a time in which gender roles were rigidly prescribed in culture and in law as part of the conservatism following independence (D'Arcy 99-100) puts her at yet another remove from opportunities for distribution and serious critical reception.

One could argue that, together with Devlin, MacGreevy, and Beckett, Salkeld's mix of romanticism, classicism and European-style modernism, along with her use of and wariness of form, represents a set of peculiarly Irish responses to Modernism. This Irish modernism earns the

designation by its engagement with the changes of modern life and anxieties over the particular forms of expression best suited to those changes, but becomes particularly Irish in its refusal to embrace any one generally-sanctioned approach to the exclusion of others. Certainly no poetry is completely exclusive in approach, and the best of modernism, high and low, experiments with different means of expression within the poem. However Irish modernists like Salkeld are *more* wary of becoming trapped by artistic isms and less committed to those with which they experiment. *The Fox's Covert* gives voice to this undercurrent of indecision (which becomes more of a stance itself for all Irish modernists rather than an indication of inconsistency).

Perhaps Salkeld's *oeuvre* stands on its own rather than fitting into of the categories that generally emerge in studies of poetry of this period. Her adherence to form—always the sonnet—and full embrace of modernization make her alien to the modernist camp; the poetry's insistence on the now rather than the past, either historic or mythic, separates it from Revivalism or the imperatives of rootedness in the neo-classicism and neo-Romanticism of Clarke and Kavanagh; and it is entirely too hopeful and defiant in tone to sing in the same angst-filled register as the other poets in this study. Salkeld's poetry comes closest to that of Austin Clarke in its preoccupation with the notion of freedom and the beginnings of a robust Irish literary feminism in poetry, with far less restraint and far more bravado. Her insistence upon possibility is in concert with a wider contemplation in her work of notions of freedom against the forces of enclosure. Her poetry resonates with that of Clarke, Devlin, and Kavanagh in its resistance to stagnation and call for alternative frameworks of life and growth, but hers tackles stagnation in relation to space and time. Salkeld's foregrounding of enclosure is expressly feminist and calls

forth the forms of spatial restraint the speaker suffers as a professional woman also expected to maintain the physical space which contains her.<sup>39</sup>

Clarke and Devlin may have set a number of their poems in cities, but with the exception perhaps of Devlin's "Communication from the Eiffel Tower," neither poet incorporates modern technology as effortlessly as Salkeld, who regularly includes airplanes, trams, cars, radio, and the cinema in her poems. Anticipating Eavan Boland, Salkeld's Ireland is largely suburban rather than rural; and travel between the city and that suburban home by train not only connects professional and domestic life but brings modernization to the forefront of her poetry. But Salkeld is no futurist. Emerging technology is merely part of the physical and cultural landscape she incorporates. Like Morton's "Spindle and Shuttle," in "A Propos of Radio" from . . . *the engine is left running*, for instance, the radio itself is morally neutral, to be used either as an agent of corruption or of cultural continuity. It also stands out as an unusually optimistic poem, particularly in comparison to those of Salkeld's contemporaries. The poem takes place in a taxi, where the driver vocalizes knee-jerk conservative misgivings about recent cultural changes. Salkeld's use of language more suited to clergy giving a radio address than a taxi driver chatting with a passenger reveals her real target.

'A vulgar decade,' jerks the driver,  
'Coarse song, lewd dance, and (cold conniver)'  
'The literary realist,'  
'Makes patter, lest a shrug be missed;'  
'Perversion thieving in the pantry,'

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<sup>39</sup>Salkeld's interrogations of enclosure put her in good company with contemporary feminist writers such as Virginia Woolf (particularly in *A Room of One's Own*) and Gertude Stein (*Tender Buttons*).

‘And blasphemy the speech of gentry.’ (5-10)

But the speaker does not answer pessimism with more pessimism, nor does she engage in a polarized debate about the evils or promise of progress. Instead she aligns radio with cultural continuity and preservation, the opposite of those things that driver fears.

Hush, driver. For, one night last week,  
There was plain chant, exact and meek,  
Where gentle monks with bated breath  
Before high mysteries of Faith  
Sang clear their Christmas Kyries.

As in Morton’s poem, we see two possibilities for radio here, but the real work of the poem is to recast the concept of ‘progress’ as something more like possibility, expansiveness, and openness. Salkeld signals her intention to unclasp usual binaries by opening with the image of snow as bringing life rather than its usual role as signifier of death and dormancy.

Through the fog our progress is slow:  
We know but cannot see the snow  
That puts liveliness in the blood  
Against this muffled evening’s mood. (1-4)

Similarly, the speaker counters the driver’s lamentations with an altogether different assessment of the changes of modernization, though with a qualification (“serious men,/ Sincere, devout; some wrong” [16-17]) that suggests that Salkeld privileges possibility over the good or the moral, a decidedly secular stance which ironically closes with the speaker’s echoed “Amen.”

These are the good, expansive days—  
With growth in them: serious men,

Sincere, devout; some wrong—what then?—

A live, truth-loving Age.

Amen.

The cold driver twice hums, Amen. (16-21)

In *The Poetics of Enclosure: American Women Poets from Dickinson to Dove*, Lesley Wheeler discusses female poets who treat the lyric itself as an enclosure (1) and finds the very notion of enclosure as particularly salient for women who experience the domicile as both prison and shelter (6) and whose bodies act as real or potential biological enclosures. In this context we can read Salkeld's use of the sonnet form as a protective form of concealment.

The appeal of an enclosed mode to these poets lies in its ability to armor: it creates a walking shelter, enabling each woman to experiment with the voices, attitudes, and scenes the lyric might contain. Since reticence has been a womanly virtue, its practice can be a reassuring mask of femininity as well as an evasive one of androgyny. (Wheeler 11)

Wheeler reads the "elisions of modernism" as akin to "proper female discretion" (8); the tension between Salkeld's gender-bending in *The Fox's Covert* and its insistence upon the sonnet is not merely a matter of strict form allowing freed content but perhaps of gaining the reader's permission to experiment. Her male counterparts, after all, from Yeats to Pound to Eliot (and to a lesser extent, Devlin and MacGreevy), could arguably take greater risks in terms of overt formal experimentation. For Salkeld only social class gave her an edge in publishing; in terms of nationality and gender her poetry stood headlong against the wind. Kathy D'Arcy, in her article about Irish women poets of Salkeld's period briefly details the ways women's autonomy was curtailed both culturally and in law, and observes that three of the women she discusses were in

their 50s—just past child-rearing—before their first works were published (D’Arcy 100). As Wheeler observes in American poetry, Salkeld’s sonnets remind the reader that for a woman poet, as opposed to a male poet for whom enclosure acts as a temporary womb to incubate his poetic achievement, enclosure is permanent (Wheeler 12-13). One might be tempted to read her use of the sonnet as a pining for classicism, as we find in Devlin and Clarke, but other than one stanza that memorializes Keat’s “Ode to a Grecian Urn” (XC), nothing else in her poetry points us in this direction. Certainly she calls forth Classical mythical figures such as Proteus and Apollo, but her poetry is more overwhelmingly—and gladly—set in the now.

While *Hello, Eternity!* heedlessly demands freedom, the intricate weavings of *The Fox’s Covert* layer professional responsibility, love, partnership, and motherhood as conditions that both enable and oppress her desire for freedom. The long poem also presents a nuanced reading of enclosure in which domicile is both prison and sanctuary, most often at the same time. Salkeld’s ability to communicate joy and suffocation in the same poem, and indeed in the same physical spaces, gives voice to the impossible nature of existence as a mother, wife, actor, and poet in her particular cultural circumstances. In addition the speaker’s identity shifts back and forth between trapper and trapped, subject and object, penetrator and penetrated, as the title of the poem suggests; the fox is both hunter and hunted, where the covert is a necessary condition of being something’s prey. Salkeld amplifies these shifting binaries by including a plethora of other predator/prey relationships throughout the collection, all to which she aligns herself in various ways: eagle and mouse, man and trout, human couple and groundhog, cats and birds.

Salkeld is not content, however, to confine her playfulness with notions of enclosure to her speaker and many objects. The reader, too, is simultaneously constrained by form—she writes exclusively in sonnets—and frustrated by the promise of structure never fulfilled, despite



elaborate clues that turn up dead ends. *The Fox's Covert's* opening section consists of seven stanzas named for the solfège (Ut, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Si), or notes of the scale. Each stanza articulates a theme that the reader is invited to look for in the larger work; after all, the notes of the scale are the building blocks for the symphony. As it happens these themes indeed emerge in *The Fox's Covert* as a whole. The "Ut" stanza, which is addressed to a third party, perhaps the reader ("Quite stoop your heads down first, before you enter" [5]) describes the fox's covert, and her choice of italics and specific reference to the poem's title becomes an announcement for its status as topic-stanza for the entire poem. In it the fox's evolutionary status as predator is overwhelmed by his condition as prey.

*The hid fox needs no guile; he goes forth slinking  
From hunger's lash, when he would dumbly blink—  
His cramped limbs, numb—through twisted foliage chink,  
Chuckling at death, although from death his shrinking. (1-4)*

The fox is not only confined by its hideout—which is the extension of the threat of the hunt—but by its own body, which Salkeld describes in inwardly-curling terms. The covert creates the template for the shape of the body and mind to the extent that in order for readers to enter it they must contort their bodies *and* psyches in the manner of the fox.

*Quite stoop your heads down first, before you enter:  
A secret spot, the fox's covert, greenly veiled;  
Leave alert fear of the hunt, like a sheath, empaled  
Without, on some thorn-bush that guards his center. (Ut 5-8)*

The stanza also signals the poem's radical departure from romantic notions of enclosure as womb-like settings for male poetic inspiration, as in Wordsworth's "Nutting," in which poetic

ravishment is a form of acceptable rape. In this poem fear penetrates the covert and there is no offspring to justify the violation.

And yet *The Fox's Covert* breaks out of its own enclosures, as the fox which is so pathetically described in the “Ut” stanza shape-shifts into a woman whose increasing bravado leads her to cavalierly declare that she will “play my harp about the ice-world” (LIX 1) Salkeld’s enduring preoccupation with the kind of freedom characterized by a breaking of temporal bonds undoes the imagery-structure of her own poem. The deadly nature of what is supposed to be a place of refuge gives way in the poem to moments of an authentic sense of shelter and nurturance. The poem expands rather than shrinks as it moves towards an unexpectedly optimistic end, where the speaker urges her soul to “. . . Rise up, from my spirit’s house!/ Suffice me, through all season—and my feet will run/ The urgent hill, until the laurelled grave be won—” (CLIV 5-7). Similarly, the theme of miscalculation and the disruption of real life by imagination and memory in the “Re” stanza is both disputed and reaffirmed by opposing stanzas later in the poem, where at times such a disruption is welcome and at others disturbing. “Mi” describes the monotony of the daily grind which finds its powerful reflection in later stanzas about work inside and outside the home but is countered by images of joyful productivity and rich personal satisfaction. In “Fa” Salkeld sets up the Irish cailin/hag dichotomy as that between the woman-poet (hag) who is envious of and repulsed by mostly younger women who fully take on the trappings of femininity, and physical, rather than artistic, engagements with beauty.

Typewriter merry clicks,  
crisp paper cheery flicks;  
little paper, stiff and hard:  
austerity suits a bard—

young girls wear painted lip,  
glow with good fellowship  
...  
My heart burns in breast:  
ere anguish turn to spite,  
gulp me, eternal Night! (Fa 1-6)

The pattern continues, and the poem turns out a speaker and protagonist who functions as both a hag and a woman delighting in the superficial performances of gender, though resentment travels through the poem and resurfaces whenever a younger, prettier face appears. “Sol” expresses frustration with men’s contempt for women’s occupations (“I feel mocking flick/ of lids—back-anger’s prick—/ towards hearth and private pen” [Sol 7-9]), while the male partner of the speaker in the poem at large runs the gamut from all-absorbing love-interest to impenetrable heart to oppressor to keeper of the hearth while the speaker works away from the home, and other males figures in the poem (the merman, Apollo, Proteus, El Cid, Rodj) function as fantasies and love-objects for her. The hags return in “La,” though this time they are the targets of contempt instead of the young girls of “Fa;” already the poem is unraveling its own declarations. The solfège ends with “Si,” which is the most durable of all the introductory stanzas in that the condition of writing with virtually no audience emerges again and again in *The Fox’s Covert*.

I saw a lone man  
swaying his melodeon  
at a crossroads;  
...

For long I wondered  
at that one man  
playing dance-music with none to hear him:  
will he sway on, nor step draw near him  
any morrow gaily, on the road to Howth? (Si 1-3; 7-11)

Though the melodeon-player is male Salkeld will insist on the particular condition of the artist with no one to receive her art as specifically feminine, a hazard of the artist in general for certain but acutely true for the woman poet.

Salkeld's other, more fluid form of structuring uses the seasons. The imagery of first thirteen stanzas of the main poem references autumn, with Samhain fires (I) and other mentions of flame (III, IV), pheasant-hunting (V), bare trees (VI), and "bearded corn" (XIII). Salkeld also creates a fusion of autumn imagery and a sense of pastness and aging, as the speaker visits a former residence (VIII) and contemplates the ending of a long-standing rivalry with an elusive pheasant (V). With stanza fourteen winter comes suddenly as an announcement ("Apollo! Winter is" [XIV 1]) and lasts through stanza XXV with frigid, colorless imagery ("cold pirate limbs" [XIV 5]; "chill doubt" [XVI 8] "uncontrolled chill loneliness" [XVIII 4]; "whitewashed stance" [XIX 4]; "grey-misted, grey sharp cliffs [XXV 1]). A sense of loss, distinct from autumn pastness in its finality, pervades the Winter stanzas, particularly pertaining to the death of Salkeld's brother, Padraic (XVII), but also to the impenetrable barriers to love and intimacy. In stanza XVI the speaker is "lock[ed] . . . out" (2), and other stanzas speak of loneliness, isolation, and indifference. In stanza XXVI "brightening swift spring," the longest of the poem's seasons, (6) arrives as clearly as the first winter stanza. The imagery in these stanzas suggests the wetness and new life of spring ("muddy floor" [XXVII 3]; "Anew their lives begin" [XXXII 7]; "when

sings/ the robin” [XXXVI 4-5]; “fertile earth” [XL 3]; “rain treads upon the old drought” [XLIII 1]; “woods wild with cuckoo-calls” [LII 4]; “sweet pasturage” [LVI 5]). Stanzas XLI and XXXI describe miraculous rebirths. The death and isolation of the winter stanzas gives way to a new sense of life and connection. No longer closed off from her lover, the speaker experiences the beginnings of reconnection. “A cleft bridge does not part/ Spirits. Your essence sunken into mine” (XXIX 4-5). The birds, with their “pretty love-converse” (5) in stanza XXXII mirror their affection. Stanza XLIV calls for forgiveness, and stanza that follows encourages the ‘us’ to “storm across the void!” (XLV 7). In stanza LIX, however, winter returns as the “ice-world” (1), dashing the reader’s expectation that spring will lead to summer. Instead the remaining stanzas move wildly from season to season, as if stuck in a perpetually volatile spring. Rather than moving into summer, the poem ends with an attempt to wrest itself from its own seasonal (and therefore, temporal) constraints to move toward something freer.

Rise up, gold prodigy! Deliver, timeless one,  
 From temporal hopes, from dragons flaring through the boughs  
 Of dire enchantment! Rise up, from my spirit’s house!  
 Suffice me, through all seasons—and my feet will run  
 The urgent hill, until the laurelled grave be won—  
 Dim on the steep. (CLIV 3-8)

Ultimately a poem that wrestles with notions of enclosure and entrapment and that transparently expresses the desire for freedom must at least make an attempt to shed its own formal limitations. Salkeld is no anarchist, however, and the poem that so celebrates moments of freedom also privileges rootedness and continuity. The poem, after all, and all of her poetry, doggedly adheres to the eight-line sonnet form with variations only in rhyme. In terms of content

Salkeld's speaker both loves and loathes enclosure, so it is fitting that some of the poem's structures will stay intact while others will unravel.

More pointedly, Salkeld's use of myth and mythical structures—as in the blurring of boundaries between human and spirit worlds and the presence of spiritualized love-objects—becomes a feminist reworking of the Revivalist recovery of myth. In Salkeld's renderings the object of romantic and poetic inspiration, the figure for whom no body exists in time and for whom no particularities are either present or relevant, is male.<sup>40</sup> At times, as in the beginning section of *The Fox's Covert* and swimming through her other collections, he is the “merman.” In other places in *The Fox's Covert* he is Proteus, god of the sea; others Apollo, Sol, El Cid (a historical figure Salkeld traps in time), or the mysterious and eastern Rodj. The history of the relationship of the sea to Irish poetry is a long and complex one, but does not, until Salkeld, conflict with the prevailing Western notion of water as a feminine element; here, in her invocation of Proteus as male muse, Salkeld draws upon a neglected strain in classicism wherein water is the domain of the male, where a male god is as likely to be the source of inspiration as a female one. In stanza II we see that she not only submerges Proteus as timeless muse but that she controls when he comes to her as well. “I’ll call, with the birds/ In flickered brightness about me—cry out: Predict,/ Prophecy now to me” (II 5-7). But the speaker's relationship with her male muses does not merely create a reversal in which she now has the same kind of power a male poet would normally hold. She is acutely aware that she cannot completely disable her muses and that they still represent a form of potential threat to her as a woman. Even as the

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<sup>40</sup> As Kathy D’Arcy argues, “This ‘merman’ has been made to play the mute, passive role usually assigned to female figures in Irish and other poetry of the time” (D’Arcy 109-10).

speaker runs to the merman for refuge and inspiration (the “La” stanza, in which the merman provides relief from the old women), she keeps a refuge *from* them, as in stanza IV.

From the cold and wild merman I have concealed well,

Motherly-wise.

A small flame-holiness, male envy cannot quell.

I feared much for the germ faint-quickenings so deep,

And coiled about with day’s coarse circumstance. As sweep

Of furious floods gave tongue, I sighed a wordless spell

Through my Apollo-drunken veins, through my heart’s shell—

Shielding the prize! (IV 1-6)

Not only does the speaker recognize her male muses as potential threats in terms of their excesses (“furious floods”), but her specific form of protection is that which only a woman can exercise, that of the womb guarding a fetus. In this case the human fetus becomes her *own* muse, the “flame-holiness” to which Proteus and the others can contribute but which does not belong to them. Salkeld’s sexual metaphor is potent here: the merman is at once a partner in her inspiration and a threat to it, just as a male partner is both a genetic contributor and, potentially, a threat to the offspring that remains the sole domain of the female partner while in the womb. Even “male envy,” or the wish for the male to possess what he has helped create but which is not his to nurture, can penetrate the womb. The need for refuge from the source of inspiration is present but far less potent in the male tradition of female muses. Thus Salkeld both recognizes the persistence of potential male violence even in a reversal and asserts unique female power in the form of her own muse-womb.

Salkeld extends this notion of womb-as-power into stanza VIII, transforming the womb-space as one she protects to one that encloses her as well. The stanza describes an older woman visiting a former home where as a younger woman she performed domestic work for her family, and here memory becomes another object of protection. The house envelops the speaker's identity as home-keeper and as such acts as a sort of time capsule.

Soft slides the bolts. As through a gap in my own heart,  
Entering in,  
We look about us trembling.  
Each thing is a part  
Of my own substance, here. Earth floor: my busy feet  
Drew in and gave out peace. I make devout retreat:  
No word or look profane, no timid guilty start . . .  
The Past, an island here and forever—leased to Art—  
Oceaned from sin. (VII 1-6)

Significantly, the speaker's male partner is part of the "we," so that even in the presence of potential male violence she allows this intrusion. The earlier stanzas, particularly those in the poem's first Spring, make generous use of this "we," the male half of which is, in contrast to the male muses, quite in time (in stanzas VII, VIII, and IX, for example, the male partner walks in the present with the speaker to reminisce about a shared past). In the realm of human relationships, then, her sanctuary is not as secure as it is in her role as poet. Notice, however, that the "we" falls away as she describes a place that, while not completely secure, was her domain as a woman. Her being and materiality merges with that of the house, and the poem has moved from water (they've crossed a bridge to get to the house) to solid earth. To further strengthen the



sense of woman as site of power and agency the next stanza takes a closer look at the bridge that takes her to the house. It is “noble, but useless” (IX 5) as “the whole vale has a crowning ridge” (6) that presumably could be used instead. Here is an object that exists merely for decoration, and here Salkeld makes it male.

In the following stanzas the speaker whose carefully guarded yet penetrable domain is inhabited by a male partner becomes preoccupied with making the intrusion go both ways, but as a continuation of her recognition of the realities of male privilege the speaker finds that there is no easy way into her partner’s corresponding space. In stanza X she slips out at night—the heavy presence of the “we” in many of the surrounding stanzas makes her trip more conspicuously solo—to gather a healing liquid from a “mystic herb” (X 4), taking care not to spill it in yet another act of protection. In the next stanza she wishes that his sipping of the liquid whose “essence [is] blent through wine with art” (XI 1), and which here becomes symbolic of home (“Bear homewards then” [XI 1]) could “cure that hollow intolerant heart” (3), but it is not to be. She wonders, “What if I keep on playing, through change, true love’s part?/ May I not claim his comradeship, when spirits start/ Manning death’s ship?” (6-8). What is a declaration of mastery with her male muses is a question when it comes to her real male partner, and she wonders if age will help. As if to apologize for the impertinence of demanding equality—in this case interpenetration—she asks in the next stanza, “Why wish to be his comrade?” (XII 1). She answers, “It was the stars’ choice” (XII 1). She wouldn’t have chosen him, a “cynic with heart moth-eaten” (XII 3), and yet the speaker detects something true under the layers of falseness that form the male partner’s own protection, and what she finds is associated with water. “Past the stern bones, though, I came on a cold grey flood,/ His untouched spirit” (XII 5-6). But their true union is only possible with death: “The stars! We shall, at His Voice,/ Over their ashes—knit-up

in true equipoise,/ Shine unashamed!” (6-8). Salkeld’s yearning for the time- and space-transcendent experience (and in this case, transcendence of gender barriers) emerges in this stanza and recurs frequently through the rest of the poem.

The mention of cynicism in stanza XII is the key to the major content-related difference between Salkeld’s poetry and that of the other mid-twentieth century Irish poets I discuss. It is that despite her acknowledgement of the strictures afforded by her social position as a woman, which expands in her poetry to address the more general, and that shared with her fellow poets, sense of containment in this period, Salkeld’s speaker in *The Fox’s Covert*, and the speakers of her other collections, doggedly refuses to abandon joy in exchange for cynicism. Repeatedly in *The Fox’s Covert* Salkeld references the “soul,” and even as she describes enclosures of the body, heart, and mind, the speaker maintains hope that this free aspect of human experience will exercise that boundlessness, and that (perhaps more importantly), the changes of modernization have created opportunities for this freedom to flourish.

Salkeld makes it clear, though, that while modernization provides the potential for expansiveness, modernism does not necessarily do the same. In this sense she is in concert with some moments in Devlin’s poetry (particularly in his poem “Now”). In stanza XXXVI Salkeld specifically indicts modernism for its failure to appreciate beauty, which here she describes as particularly wedded with a sense of joy.

What darks their eye to beauty? Makes the live heart twist  
To mechanism  
From splendors? Is it sin, the free-lance armorist—  
Disrelishing true beauty’s permanence, when sings  
Robin—spills fragrance—for the fly on beacon wings?

Though Advent gloom, cold air, bare palsied boughs persist—  
I cannot tire of those white gulls through the clear mist,  
Spruce modernism! (1-8)

To be fair to modernism's diversity, in this case Salkeld is taking specific aim at the strain of modernism overly preoccupied, in her opinion, with form ("mechanism"). Salkeld's ecclesiastical language with her mention of sin and Advent takes on the cloak of religious opposition to modernism but in the service of a more secular agenda. Beauty, which "persist[s]," is akin to faith in its eternal nature ("permanence"). Her mixing of religious language and secular subject matter, which we saw in "A Propos of Radio" from . . . *the engine is left running* attacks her obvious target (here, a specific kind of modernism) while slyly taking aim at another one: what is truly eternal is beauty and (in other places in the collection), the free soul, and *these* are what oppose "spruce modernism," not the stultifying structures of religion. In this way Salkeld's poetry resonates well with Kavanagh's, for which the beauty of nature offers a panacea for the deadness of the Church and its effects on rural life, and with MacGreevy's, for which wilderness takes on an eternal nature (see "Nocture of the Self-Evident Presence"). It also connects her with Clarke's romantic tendencies, though her embrace of modernization conflicts with the retrograde quality of eighteenth-century European romanticism. In addition, her sense of modernism in this poem does not aptly describe Yeats's later modernist-leaning poetry, in that it does not abandon the "white gulls through the clear mist" for "mechanism."

When Salkeld's poet breaks through to comment on its own voice in stanzas CXXXVI through CXXXIX, the speaker-as-poet foregrounds her refusal to commit to any one poetic style, a move that brings her into concert with the refusals of her fellow poets. After a series of stanzas which are increasingly maudlin and transparent the speaker gets sick on her own excesses.

Thoughts, no—hysteria, no. Within a noble will's  
Easy control—  
Authentic record of the common heart, fulfils  
The best of poetry. And who falls short of life's  
Sharp intimacies, pitiful charities and strifes—  
Will spin no lasting verse of dream. Failure distils  
Heart-killing poison—(so, we must not fail)—that spills  
Into the soul.

What makes Salkeld's poetry resound with so much Irish poetry, however, not just Irish modernism, is its insistence on a kind of "third way." Like the Field Day's creation of a "fifth province,"<sup>41</sup> Kavanagh's call for a differently Christocentric faith, and Beckett's proposal of a radical form of humanism based in physiology, Salkeld provides a third way for the problem of the oppressive nature of relationship between men and women: siblinghood. In three places Salkeld offers the model of the sibling relationship—specifically between brothers and sisters—as a contrast to the tumultuous and unequal relationship between a woman and her male partner and even that between the woman and her male muses. The speaker introduces her deceased brother in stanza XVII.

I loved my brother, Padraic, as one loves one's kind.  
No he-and-she,  
While he spun on his tales, and I spoke out my mind.  
I loved Padraic, too, for his lofty Dante look—

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<sup>41</sup> See "Editorial I/Endodermis" of the inaugural issue of *Crane Bag* in spring of 1977, p. 4. Editors of *Crane Bag*, who coined the term in this editorial, were Richard Kearney and Mark Patrick Hederman. *Crane Bag* was instrumental in the Field Day enterprise.

Soft Gaelic speech—reverent hand on the printed book.

They buried him in the realm of our western wind. (1-6)

In this stanza Salkeld continues her male/female reversals as she gives the female speaker the power of expressive, opinionated speech, and her brother the realm of the imagination. She describes Padraic in feminine terms, with “soft” speech. The speaker and her brother are truly one, in contrast to Salkeld’s descriptions of marriage. There is no inside and outside in this stanza, nothing to penetrate or be penetrated, but rather one being with two parts. Salkeld’s naming is also instructive, as it suggests siblinghood as an alternative to *Irish* notions of masculinity and femininity and the relationship between the two. The speaker associates Padraic with the west, with art, and with Gaelic, all three of which belong to the realm of the passive Irish female in many nationalist formulations. Salkeld returns to siblinghood in stanza LI, again calling to mind the specifically Irish nature of the gender binary with images from Ireland’s own mythology.

She is fair, she is like Lir’s daughter, turned to swan—

Changed by a spell—

Sisterly guarding her brothers when dark tides ran

Harsh with the north wind. Soft the white sheltering wings,

The bosom of pity. Low her young laughter rings—

A little fiercely— (1-6)

While the female swan has “soft” wings, connecting it with conventional femininity, it is also active and protective, unlike the victimized swan in Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan” (Yeats 102), pointedly in its role as “fierce” guard of male siblings. Her magical transformation from human to swan is significant here, too, because it proposes the need for transcendence as well as

recasting the role of magic as agent of social transformation rather than a protector of the existing social order.

Stanza CXIV returns to the oneness of the brother-sister bond and the absence of an outside to the relationship, but laments that it exists only in the realm of memory and imagination.

I only knew the you-and-me of you, that sham  
Golden but gone.  
How do you seem with foes, familiars? Dazed I am,  
Guessing you outside memory. To see a fly  
Drag crystal wings along your hand delicately,  
Linking you to the actual! Wait till I cram  
My traits, stiff battered down into one cryptogram,  
Dumb as stone! (1-8)

In order to be one with her brother, the speaker must sublimate his actual particularities apart from her. Though the brother-sister bond is preferable to that between husband and wife, in that it offers the possibility of true unity, the price of it is the death of the individual. There is also the danger that the speaker will, in order to preserve the illusion, become guilty of privileging her own personality over that of her brother. His death (“he-and-she” explicitly recalls the stanza XVII; and the presence of a fly on a body further references death) creates a void into which the only thing the speaker has available to fill it is herself. Thus Salkeld points to a danger in the typical casting of male-female relationships not only in the way it plays out in real marriages but also, in the absence of living bodies, the danger of its excesses in the world of imagination. As much as she celebrates it elsewhere in her poetry, she admits here that imagination (and its close

partner, memory) is as susceptible to the excesses of personality as are actual human relationships in real time. Salkeld does not develop this idea to the extent that Beckett does in his formulation of a radical humanism based on living bodies, but her experiments with alternative male-female relationships certainly begins to point in that direction. True male-female unity and equality must happen in real time between real bodies; and because poetry relies on imagination and memory, it cannot provide this ideal.

Like most of the Irish poets of this period, Salkeld foregrounds the act of writing and her concerns about its proper execution. But Salkeld is explicit about her own material circumstances in relation to writing, specifically what it means to write as a woman in a male-dominated workforce. She addresses everyday conflicts between domestic responsibilities, practical discomforts associated with moving among men during her routine work day, and larger issues of audience and readership for someone who knows very well the paltry size of her poetry's distribution.

*The Fox's Covert* begins, in the "Sol" stanza of the first section, with a description of how men are both blinded to and contemptuous of the world in which women writers live. After describing the sightlessness of men she encounters on her commute, the speaker feels ". . . mocking flick/ of lids—back-anger's prick—/ towards hearth and private pen" (Sol 7-9), where the "prick" is an expression of both the speaker's own contempt for the men and a statement of the power of the men's judgment.

In stanza XXII the speaker describes her work in terms of domestic work—weaving—in ways that both highlight the gap inherent in such a comparison (the loom always produces; the pen does not) and capture the mindless, empty nature of routine, whether domestic or intellectual.

Four times a day, shuttled to and fro through the town;  
From my bed to desk, from desk to bed—and no trace  
Leave on day's loom, nor with cipher of leaf or face  
Sign the blank world. (XXII 5-8)

The stanza begins with the speaker's lament that she has not been able to keep her houseplants, a collection of herbs, alive, and the implication when coupled with a contemplation on the monotony of writing is that she has failed in her role as life-giver and sustainer. Salkeld's wedding of writer's block with an act of neglect leading to death both deepens the act of writing as essential to life and trivializes the upkeep of the beautiful and supplementary. Despite the fact that weaving is an arguably essential art, the keeping of herbs—and she describes them as “fragrant”—is not. Is writing essential, like weaving, or merely decorative, as the cultivation of herbs? The poem makes a case for both, and in doing so gets to the crux of the nature of any art (domestic, public, or otherwise) as both essential and superfluous. Salkeld's bringing together of domestic and intellectual work makes this point possible; certainly there are other ways of getting to a similar place, as other poets have proved, but Salkeld's approach elevates domestic work to the same dually inane and serious level of mind-work.

Stanza XXX contains a familiar moment for a reader of Salkeld, for even as she voices frustration with writing as a woman in a man's world she declares her enthusiastic intention to keep writing.

‘I will praise my wild forebears, nor wish to abate  
Passion or pride,  
Though these undo me,’ she cried, to men's silent hate.  
‘These I loved, these am. Little wonder, my hope failed—



Following to free thought, where their natures prevailed.

I will rush to their spirits from the stroke of Fate!

I will nest with them in Eternity, elate.'

Slowly she died. (1-8)

While it is possible that "men's hate" is simply the use of the (for the time) universally male pronoun, her use of 'men' in its particularly gendered case in other places in the long poems allows this stanza to be read as gendered as well. Again Salkeld returns to the idea of oneness, though here she advances the argument that true unity happens only in death, a claim the speaker disputes in stanza CXIV. More interestingly, however, is her dogged insistence upon claiming the male canon as her heritage (I read "these" line three as a reference to both "wild forebears" in line one and "men's silent hate" in line three, as though the forebears wish not to be claimed by a woman) though she has no right to do so as a female writer. It is an act only possible in proximity to death, of course, because lived, gendered life offers no such possibilities.

But is the woman of stanza XXX truly dead? Has her claim to the male canon cost her her life? Perhaps not, for in the next stanza a woman rises from her own deathbed.

The Indian wife, stretched stiff upon her funeral pyre,

Wakes out of death!

Even as men stoop to set the readied pile afire,

In saving stir she sighs.

They start back, letting slip

Taper and torch, in mist of smoke, about her dip,

Gently lift up, and bear her faint in death's attire.

Sudden night falls. They chant on, with the insects' choir

Mixing their breath. (XXXI 1-8)

It is men here who prepare the funeral fire, but the woman awakes to disrupt the ritual. In doing so she puts them in a position of supplication; the men “dip” to lift her up. The appearance of her death has already caused them to “stoop;” in the normal course of events, the only possibility of elevation is in death. But her awakening disrupts the social order as the men now bow before a live woman. The end of the stanza leaves some doubt as to what happens next. The suddenness of night falling and the fact that they continue the funeral chant suggests that perhaps despite her waking they continue with the ritual; although it would be tempting to read the continuation of the chanting as a song of joy rather than lamentation the sudden presence of night along with the men’s association with insects—they are animalistic, then—works strongly against such a reading. The woman can only expect a brief moment of elevation in life, just as the woman of the previous stanza.

As suddenly as the poem moves from the realm of the purely poetic in stanza XXX to the briefly Lazarusic death of an Indian woman, it transitions quickly to a situation the speaker-as-writer faces in relation specifically to her role as a working woman.

Even as the moon is risen, she enters in—

Quick, that was cold.

Steps over her dropped litter, half in swoon, to win

Dim-smiling over her infants, who, unknowing loss,

Share not their elders’ triumph, yet are tired and cross,

Being all day motherless! . . . She lets her weak thoughts spin,

Against their fathers’ breast.

Anew their lives begin—

Cleft from the old! (XXXII 1-8)

The last two lines of the stanza signal both the change in role from working woman to mother and the sense that this socially new ordering of domestic work, in which the husband takes on some child-rearing, still depends up the old order (marriage). The stanza's position immediately after two stanzas that take up women's social positioning in a grander sense contextualizes its particularity. The positioning of the next stanza, in which Salkeld admires the love shared between two birds and compares it to "true poetry" (XXXIII 6), emphasizes Salkeld's ambivalence surrounding the intersection of real social inequities and the satisfying intimacies of even the most lopsided of relationships. The "old" life from which the new one is "cleft" in stanza XXXII becomes the wellspring of a rich comparison between an affectionate bird couple and the relationship between poet and muse. "So, true poetry speaks—/ Faint through the traffic, to pilgrim whose shy ear seeks—/ Echoed, his vows" (XXXIII 6-8). Thus Salkeld's poetry sits uneasily between the yearning for gender equity and the acknowledgment of the poetic possibilities of the existing, if complex, relations between men and women.

Salkeld's exploration of the relationships between men and women and its implications for poetry continues to deepen later in *The Fox's Covert* with the image of woman as statue, possibly drawing from the biblical story of Lot's wife who is punished for looking back by turning into a pillar of salt. In several stanzas Salkeld gives the now-statued woman the qualities of intransigence and of possibility, even in stone, and leads into her informed but dogged optimism. Salkeld introduces us to this woman, who has been turned to stone by sorrow, in stanza LXX. She is "solidifying, stirless, without wish or guess" (5), as even her spirit has turned to stone; and yet she is "entirely [her] own:/ Spirit of stone!" (7-8). The next stanza echoes that of XXXI as the statue-woman comes to life, but not quite as a living body.

You think, you breathe—so now is stone articulate:  
How did you brood,  
Silt up and petrify, into your statued state?  
Noble, it may be—almost terrible: no threat  
You veil, nor promises. Acknowledging no debt,  
Inheriting no dream: impersonal—a Fate—  
Excluding all things else, a sheer self, you negate  
Evil and good. (LXXI 1-8)

Salkeld's woman turns to stone just as she becomes an object; but the very process of solidifying, of losing the warm particularity that defies objectification, becomes the occasion for ultimate resistance. She cannot be the site of moralizing, nor the repository for someone else's imaginings, nor the reflection of ideals. Although the voice of Salkeld's speaker in this long poem remains consistent and there is not as much slippage of subject and object as is typical of late modernist literature,<sup>42</sup> Salkeld's direct reference to the female object as the site of *de facto* resistance acknowledges resistance as inherent in the very tradition against which the statue-woman pushes. In stanza CX the speaker is herself the statue as she rides the tram past the house of a man she knows whose curtains are open, she guesses, to "catch our hum" (4), but he cannot match her ability to remain "joyously" frozen (8), "a mere/ Shadow, my way, my work," (5-6) though her true self moves on with the tram ("I still poised there—/ not here—" [6-7]). To *him*, as his object, she is frozen, and therefore impermeable, and able to escape without notice. Here

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<sup>42</sup> See Salkeld's *Experiment in Error* for more experimental poetry along these lines. As Moynagh Sullivan writes, "The speaker of the poems [in *Experiment in Error*] dually operates both as the object of modernist poetics, and as a subject whose presence is dangerous to the practice of the very poetry that she writes" (Sullivan 191).

Salkeld's former object speaks as subject, and in doing so affords her a life in time, though the former object's subject perceives her as frozen in it. Salkeld turns the statue inside out in stanzas CII and CVI to describe (ironically, as a poet) that within the object which no poet can capture and forms the basis of her bravado.

There is a pale calmness, its poise seems to affright  
Time's to-and-fro:  
So built up in serenity, storms cannot slight;  
Having so sure relations to its centre—light  
Flows in and out of its being, and there is no night.  
Made one in shadowy verse, my hearing, touch, and sight  
Are dipped in that baptismal font, that constant bright  
Stillness of snow. (CII 1-8)

Here again the former object speaks for herself. She is timeless, like the statued woman, but from within, on her own terms, rather than from without. Her center, as we have seen in earlier moments in the poem, is something she guards as a woman's womb guards a fetus; and yet even that which she guards, figured here as light, is free to come and go as it pleases. It is simultaneously of her essence but independent of it, and in this sense the model provides another "third way," less materially specific than the model of siblingship but more potentially unsettling. There is the danger that this inner light could become just another strategy for locating within women the font (and indeed that word appears in line 7 of this stanza) of inspiration and truth, and Salkeld offers little in the way of a formal challenge aside from these heavily signposted subject/object switchings. Salkeld's use of coldness, in the "pale" of the first line and the snow in the last, reminds the reader that even in its transparency, this self for whom

Salkeld speaks still retains the potential for impassiveness. In stanza CVI this protected but free spirit forms the basis of Salkeld's notion of true freedom and becomes its declaration.

. . . Through dull interim  
Of Time, she sways in tenderness—that out-of-sight  
Eternity about her consciousness. Her flight  
Threatens the day. (5-8)

Her timelessness (“It is time droops, not I” [CXVI 1]) is not for general consumption but rather something essential and inviolable, and it guarantees a kind of existential freedom not available in time, or history. Harnessing this possibility she makes herself rather than being made, as in stanza CXV.

With the sweet hand of sculpture, from old granite block,  
Stubborn, I win  
My spirit's likeness—never his. A craft to mock!  
Mirroring self in opaqueness—choosing the first  
Hardness, to image love-molten will—and that worst  
Hope: to incorporate him, with a hammer's knock  
Into self's idol. Tempest laugh, moulding my rock—  
Beating ME in! (1-8)

The artist is the woman, the object not only herself, which she now creates instead of being created, a man. Here, though, even man-as-object creates resistance to the artists's efforts; the very material she uses, in fact, resists them. Is it poetry, then, that offers real resistance? Salkeld's own poetry is far from formally unconventional, and yet at times its content works at locating and amplifying socially dismantling—and freeing—possibilities of the artistic process.

The argument in CXV is clear: that despite his or her best efforts, the poet will always find him or herself reflected in the poem, and that objectification is impossible. Because of a long western tradition of women as objects in poetry, Salkeld's point is a feminist one, and it has implications for the very nature of representation as it is practiced in western literature. Salkeld more forcefully acknowledges the object's inherent resistance than male Irish poets of the time, more so than Kavanagh's (flawed) humanization of the Irish peasant, more so even than Clarke, whose female characters work to disrupt prevailing cultural attitudes surrounding women.

Thus the overarching concern of *The Fox's Covert*, of the tension between the need for both protection and freedom and the role of culturally imposed and self-imposed enclosures in negotiating those needs, is more than an interesting philosophical and linguistic exercise. It works to undermine the very foundations of the tradition in which she writes, and the—I use her term—cavalier tone of the poem, particularly toward the end, reveals her revolutionary intentions, whether or not, of course, she will actually be read. She moves from this memory of enclosure:

Ballyrea. A soft new lamb on a rough stone wall,  
Fearlessly curled,  
Set in contentment. 'Twas my enclosure, that small  
Untidy garden; but down in the valley's dream,  
A man draws up blithe trout from a shadow-swayed stream.  
Blooded silver will fade, the light, the curlew-call:  
Regret, regret. He stamps his wet boots in my hall—  
Owning my world. (XXI 1-8)

in which enclosure is both potentially violent and protective, to the declarative stance in stanza LXII, which throws off the need for protection in defense of freedom.

Henceforth, our quest is clear. Far on, there is no brink.

Outside our fear

Disaster lies not, nor abyss. Cowards, we shrink—

Our craven gesture summons shadows from the woods:

Ancient ancestral terrors hidden, stored where broods

Night-madness. Fear is sin. Step cavalierly. Wink

At harsh desire. There shimmer golden wells for drink,

Set even here. (1-8)

Salkeld resets morality as the difference between fear and boldness rather than good and evil (which her statue-woman has done away with earlier in the poem), calling on enclosed beings to give up their nests in favor of “golden wells.”

In the context of the literary mood at the time, which was focused on resistance to the enclosed nature of Irish political and social life, Salkeld’s poetry reads uncharacteristically bold and optimistic. Kavanagh’s suggests a new possibility, but not one based on willfulness and effort. Kavanagh’s poetry moves more toward a way of seeing, Salkeld’s toward an orientation of mind—fearlessness—that is its own form of action.



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